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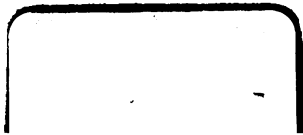
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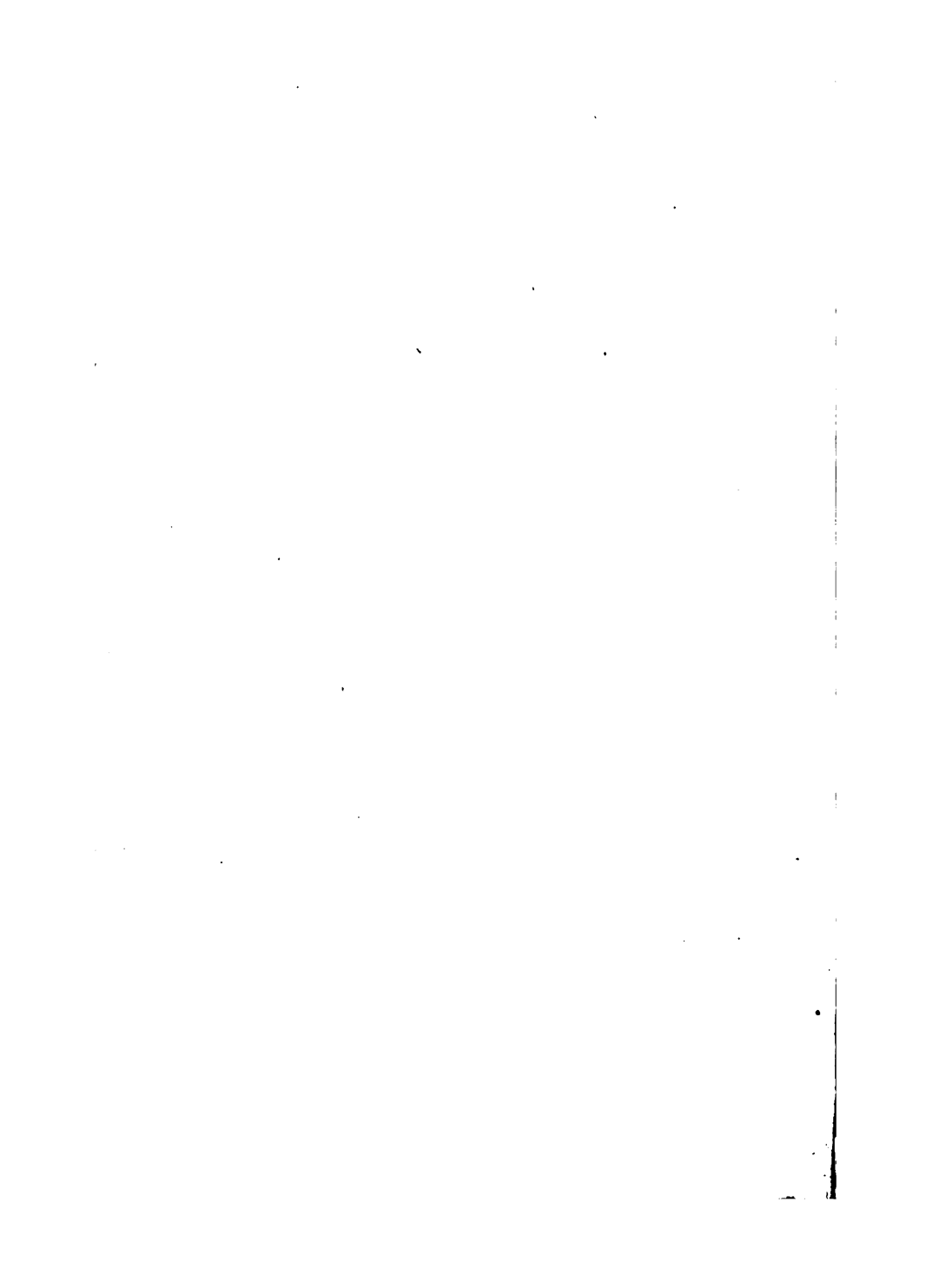
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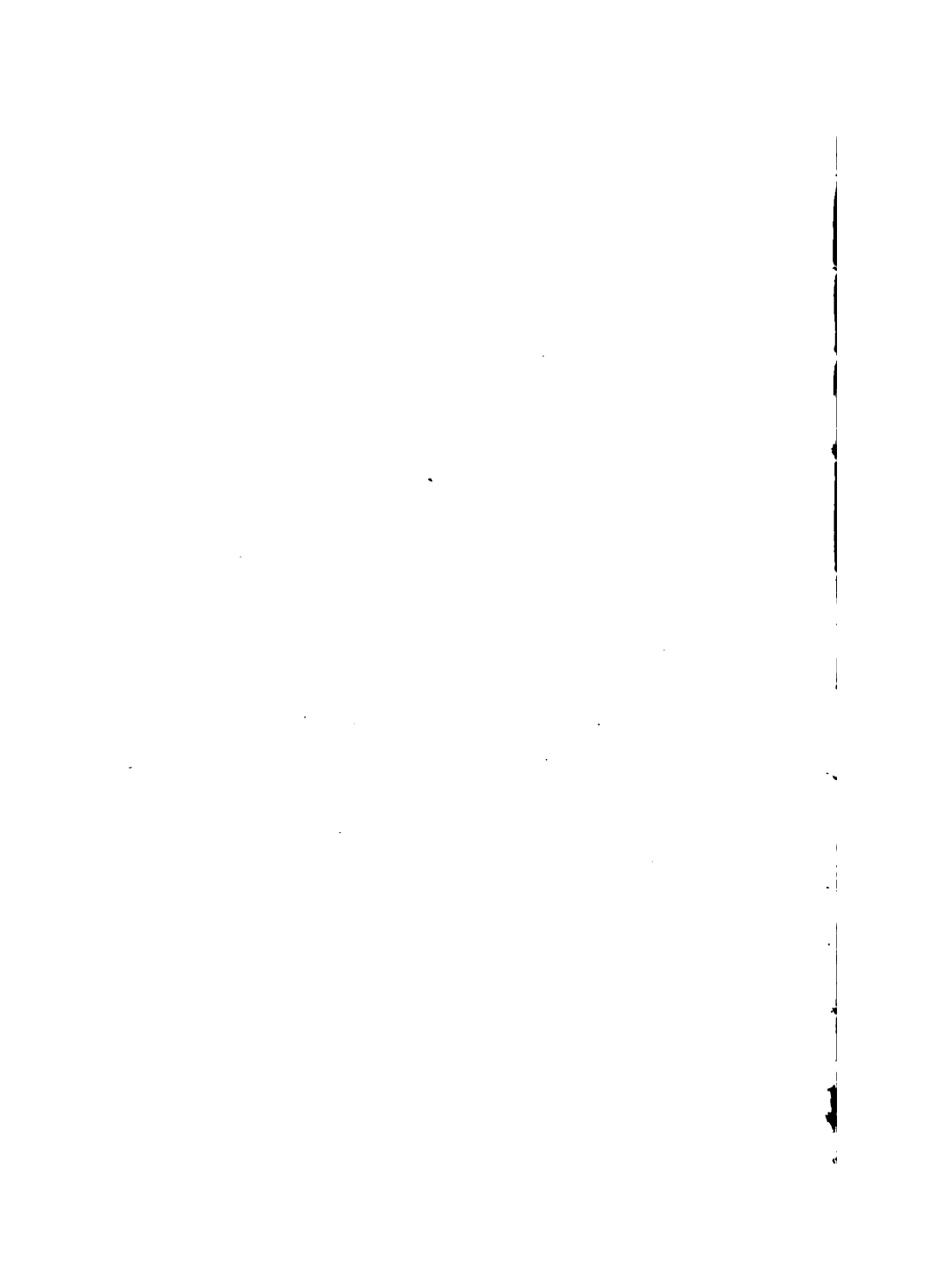
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LADY BABY



L A D Y B A B Y

A NOVEL

BY

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'BEATA,' 'BEGGAR MY NEIGHBOUR,' 'WATERS OF HERCULES,' ETC.

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IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS

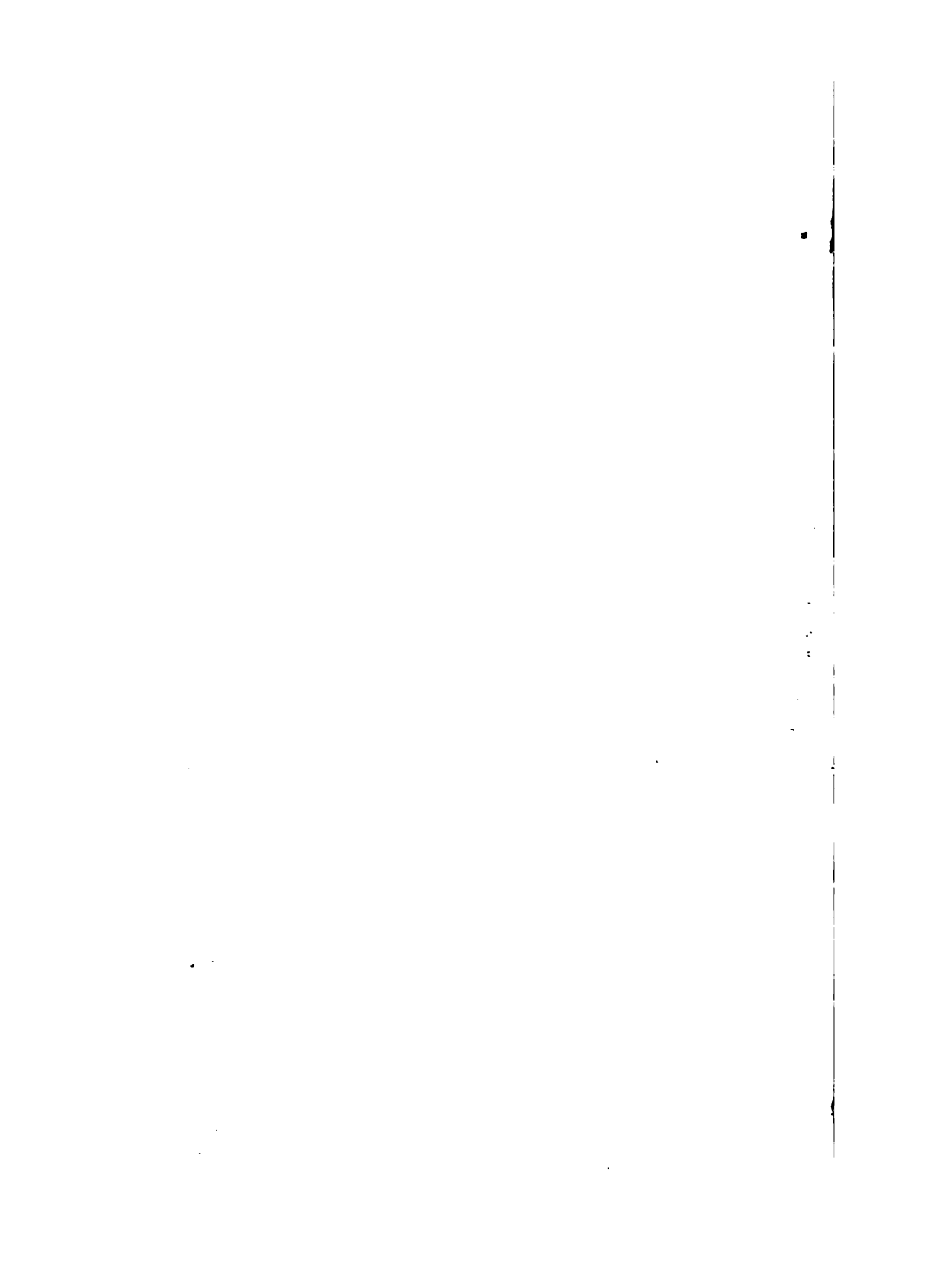
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L A D Y B A B Y.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE POLO LESSON.

“And I meant to make *you* jealous. Are you jealous of me now?”

1. WHEN Mr Carbury arrived, Lady Baby happened to be occupied on a ladder in the conservatory. She had taken a gardening fit lately; not that she understood anything about gardening, but she was apt to take up things by fits and starts, and the flowers were having their turn just then.

“I have had the ponies saddled,” said Germaine, eagerly. “How long will it take you to dress, Carbury? We might have a bit of

practice before those two fellows from the barracks come.”

“How ridiculous you are, Germaine!” said Lady Baby, who was sitting on the top rung of her short ladder, with one small foot just visible under the hem of her white dress,—“as if there wasn’t time enough to play polo later! I want Mr Carbury to help me with tying up this passion-flower.”

“But the ponies are saddled,” said Germaine, quite aghast; “and wasn’t it for the polo that Carbury came over?”

“For the polo and for other things,” said Lady Baby emphatically, and she swept her eyes round to where Sir Peter was apparently quite absorbed in the contemplation of a rare shade of yellow begonia.

“But everything is prepared,” said Germaine, looking ready to cry, “and Miss Epperton said——”

“Well,” interrupted Lady Baby, “let Mr Carbury put in a word for himself. Will you play polo at once, Mr Carbury, or will you help me now in tying up this passion-flower? I need some one tall and active.”

“Wyndhurst is tall,” said Germaine, bluntly.

“But not active—at least, not generally. Well, Mr Carbury, can you be active? Yes, or no?”

Fate had somehow arranged that she was always to be putting this form of question to him, and Fate had also arranged that he was always to answer it with “Yes.” He did so now; he could not well have done otherwise in common civility, even if the downward glance of her blue eyes had not been making such things as polo appear to him very distant and indistinct just then. He said he would tie the passion-flower, or hold the ladder, or hand the string, or do anything else required of him; and he spoke to-day with a touch of recklessness in tone and manner—a touch of something very different from his nervous demeanour of yesterday. So the passion-flower was tied, and afterwards polo was played, and Lady Baby came and sat beside Maud, and applauded very loudly whenever the ball was sent through the goal, and seemed to applaud loudest when it was Mr Carbury who sent it. And next day much

the same thing took place ; there was more passion-flower tied, and more polo played, more applause, more smiles sent from the top of the ladder to the bottom, and sent most lavishly when Sir Peter was anywhere in the vicinity. A week passed in this way. Lady Baby talked more, laughed more, with each day, and showed a more reckless gaiety. Lord Kippendale saw nothing ; he never saw anything that was not immediately thrust under his notice. Sir Peter, apparently, saw nothing either—his manner, at least, never changed: He was perfectly—almost aggravatingly—civil to Carbury, and perfectly, though gravely, affectionate to his betrothed. Germaine did not see much either, though at intervals he was visited by a glimpse of something being wrong somewhere ; but he was busy enough himself in those days, and contented himself with the vague impression that, of course, Frances could take care of herself—she always did. Agnes indeed saw, but saw without understanding. Once or twice she had asked a question, but had been immediately and peremptorily silenced. Lady Baby never came

now to her elder sister's room to be agreed with; she seemed even to avoid the alarmed questioning of Agnes's great ox-like eyes. Was it possible, was it really possible, Agnes asked herself aghast, that the child was such an arrant flirt—such an insatiable flirt—that she could not renounce the vulgar satisfaction of setting two men by the ears? And such a barefaced flirt too; for Lady Baby, new as she was to the business, could not fail to overdo her part. Her encouragement of Mr Carbury was a great deal too open and ostentatious to have deceived a shrewd and uninterested spectator. Her attempts at the depths of coquetry were of the downright and reckless sort, not to say awkward,—what Maud, speaking from experience, would have called inartistic, had her mind just now been free enough to give itself to the subject; and what Lady Euphrosyne would have stigmatised as the country-bumpkin style of doing things. There was none of the *finesse*, there were none of those delicate *nuances*, with which Miss Epperton, under similar circumstances, would have operated. Lady Baby knew of no

tactics, and dealt only in downright attacks—in full-gallop charges.

At last one day the climax came, or what she had resolved should be the climax. There had been a polo-match, in which Mr Carbury had at length brilliantly won a long-contested game. Lady Baby, wound up as it appeared to a pitch of enthusiasm, had taken a flower from her hair—it was a flower which Sir Peter had given her—and thrown it to the victor.

“Do you know what that is?” asked Carbury, riding up to the bank where she sat with Sir Peter by her side.

“A tricoloured gloxinia, I believe,” she said, laughing.

“No, a badge,” said Carbury, as he fastened the flower into his coat. “It would need the point of a lance to lift it from here.” He was bending over his horse’s neck, and spoke so that she alone could hear him; but he shot a glance towards Sir Peter. It looked like a glance of triumph. His face was still flushed with the exercise, and his eyes were wide open and brilliant. The jaded look had left his features for

the moment, he looked almost young, or "almost not middle-aged," as Lady Baby put it to herself.

"Oh, Carbury, stop a moment, if you don't mind," said Sir Peter; "don't change your position. It's the very thing for a knight of the middle ages. 'After the tournament,' you know, or something in that line. I wish I had my note-book here; that downward bend of the head is absolutely perfect."

Instead of maintaining his position, Carbury bit his lip and sat bolt upright. This was one of the moments when he felt Sir Peter's cool friendliness to be almost insulting. Was the man really so blind as he pretended to be? or was he so conceited, or so confident in his youth, that he would not do the older man the honour of being jealous?

Lady Baby got up from her seat on the bank and stroked the neck of the brown pony. "Fire-fly knows his business, doesn't he, Mr Carbury? I am sure he runs after the ball of his own accord. It can't be so very difficult to play polo on a good pony; and oh, show me your

mallet. It isn't at all heavy; I am sure I could manage it. Don't you think that Zet would make a good polo pony?"

"Why not try?" said Mr Carbury, eagerly. "You would not be my first lady-pupil at polo."

Lady Baby hesitated, and looked sideways at Sir Peter.

"I—I should like it very much," she began; "but I am not quite sure whether it would be—advisable."

"I think it would be most unadvisable," said Sir Peter, decisively.

"Oh! Why?"

"Because it is so very much of a toss-up as to whether you will end by landing on your head or your heels."

"Oh, is that all? I am not afraid of that."

"Then, will you try?" asked Carbury.

"Perhaps. I shall think about it, but I must go home now;" and she turned abruptly and walked towards the house. After a few steps Sir Peter joined her.

"It is very kind of Mr Carbury to want to teach me polo," she began.

“Very.”

“And what do you think of the plan?”

“I told you what I think : I think it is extremely foolish.”

“Because of the chance of coming down?”

“Yes.”

There was nothing more said on the subject. Sir Peter, on reaching the house, went to the smoking-room to write letters for the post. Lady Baby retired to her room. An hour later she was standing on the doorstep in her habit, and pulling on her gloves with a curious air of defiance. She had been as far as the smoking-room door, half intending to go in and announce to Sir Peter that she was about to have her first polo-lesson ; but she had come away without turning the handle, and she meant now to go without his knowledge.

“It is quite clear that he does not approve of the polo,” she said to herself, “and if this does not bring on the crisis nothing will.”

The polo-ground was some distance from the house, in a portion of the park which lay solitary, and surrounded by a grove of beeches.

Germaine was still there, practising by himself. The lesson began, but Lady Baby was not quite so promising a pupil as Mr Carbury had expected: she appeared at moments to forget what she was there for, and just as often hit the empty air as the ball. Germaine became rather indignant, and in his eagerness to demonstrate the necessity of sharp turnings, he succeeded in effecting so very sharp a turning that he brought his pony to its knees; and though he had pulled it together in a moment, it became evident in the next few minutes that the beast was dead lame.

“It’s over then for to-day,” he said despondently. “You’re coming along with me too, I suppose, Frances?”

“What for? Because your pony is lame? Mine isn’t, and I am just beginning to get into the spirit of the game. I shall stay.”

“All by yourself with Carbury?” asked Germaine, staring. Mr Carbury was at that moment at the opposite end of the ground.

“Yes; why not?”

“Look here,” said Germaine, bluntly, “I

don't know what you are driving at; but it strikes me that something is off the square. I don't think you are fair upon Wyndhurst. You had better come home with me. It will be dark in half an hour."

"Dear boy," she said, smiling, but there was something like a demon of recklessness in her eyes,—“when I feel in need of advice I shall know exactly where to come to for it; you seem to have a large stock on hand. In the meantime I am going to play polo.”

“And what am I to say to Wyndhurst?”

“Anything you like. You can tell him that my bones are still unbroken.”

“Well, it's your own business, of course; but I should recommend you to look out. Those quiet fellows are far the worst sort when once their blood is up. If you don't look out, you may have the devil to pay yet.” And Germaine, having eased his conscience, walked off with his pony and left his sister to take care of herself.

If Lady Baby had been calm enough to have taken note of Mr Carbury's look as he saw

Germaine depart, she might have felt moved to recall her brother or to follow him. In the first moment Carbury had been almost as surprised as Germaine; then upon the surprise had come something like a flash of joy; and then, from having been unusually talkative, he grew silent, with that ominous silence which is more dangerous than words.

The polo was resumed, but pursued in a somewhat desultory fashion. Lady Baby's conversation died out by degrees, and she too lapsed into intervals of silence, never noticing the long questioning looks with which Mr Carbury was seeking vainly to meet her glance. Meanwhile the dusk was stealing in, and twice she had suggested going home; and Mr Carbury had pleaded for a few minutes longer, and she had yielded, half unwillingly, and yet with a secret looking forward to the crisis which this must bring about.

It was dusk in good earnest when at length they turned into the grass avenue, moving at a foot-pace, for the ponies had had a hard afternoon of it. Lady Baby began to feel now that

she too was tired, and that polo was, after all, a rather fatiguing game.

“This is the place,” said Mr Carbury suddenly, and for a moment he drew rein. “Yes; this is the very place,” he repeated, coming to a standstill, and gazing round about him in the dusk.

“Which place?”

“The place where you came through the bushes that evening in spring. I heard the branches rustle, and wondered what it was; it might have been a deer or a hare springing up—how easily it might have been that! but it was not; it was—you. The grass was green, but there were no leaves on the trees yet. I think there was a bird singing somewhere; was there not?”

“I daresay there was,” she said, listlessly. “It is not unusual for birds to sing in spring. That was the day that Suleika threw Nicky. Is it not that day you are talking of?”

“Yes, it is that day.”

They moved on again in silence. After a minute, she said, with something between a

laugh and a sigh, "It seems a long way off now, and yet it is scarcely three months. That day was like the beginning. You came first, and then Maud, and then Peter."

"That day *was* the beginning," said Carbury.

"I wish it had never begun," she cried, upon some sudden impulse. "I was happier then; everything was so much simpler." She checked herself; but she had said enough already—she had said too much.

Carbury had brought his horse close to her side. "You wish it had never begun?" he said, quickly. "You were happier then? You are not happy now?"

"Yes, yes, I am happy—of course I am happy," she hastily retorted; but even as she said it, she felt something hot on her cheek, and a bright drop fell on the black pony's mane. She was tired and uneasy and dissatisfied with herself, and that tear that fell came only from the petulance of a spoilt child that finds itself unexpectedly crossed in a whim; but Carbury could not know this. He was near enough to see the drop fall, and he started as though

it had been liquid fire, and had fallen upon him.

“Happy? You say you are happy? Look at that!” and bending forward, he pointed to the glistening drop which even then Zet was shaking from his mane. “Do people cry when they are happy?”

But Lady Baby was fiercely drying her eyes, and scarcely heard. As for his face, she could not see it, or the look written there might have scared her into the knowledge of the work she had accomplished. More than once in the past week had this flash of wild hope lighted up Carbury’s weary eyes, which at first had looked so uncertain and perplexed, so inclined to be convinced, yet afraid of believing too soon. But Lady Baby, while looking in his face, was calculating the effect of each look upon Peter; while speaking to him, was weighing the importance which each word would gain in Peter’s ear; while smiling at him, was measuring the depth of the stab which that smile would be to Peter. Her bodily eyes were on Mr Carbury, but her mental eyes were,

so to say, turned over her shoulder towards Peter; and the changes on his face were of no more account to her than would have been the faint breath upon a mirror.

To-night, if it had not been for the dusk, she might have seen more; but they were nearing the house. Oh, to have been now where they had been a quarter of an hour back! thought Carbury. To have been now on the lonely grass-plot among the beeches! He could have said much then; he could say little now.

“There is something wrong; I knew it. I have guessed, I hoped, but I was not sure. I want you to tell me what it is.”

“You?” she said, somewhat tremulously, as she pocketed her handkerchief. “Oh, never, never! I could never tell *you!*” Even Lady Baby, accustomed as she was to be petted and consoled by any one to whom she deigned to pour out her griefs, felt aware that she could scarcely confide in the man whom she had used as her instrument.

“You have some trouble, then, some cause for

unhappiness; could you tell it to any one else, and why not to—me?"

He held his breath to listen, for the blood was hammering in his temples.

"Oh, never, never!" she said quickly; "not to you of all men in the world."

His heart gave a leap of insane delight. "You shall tell it me yet," he muttered; for they were entering the porch. "Oh, I have not been blind, and I have understood very well."

"That is why he played into my hands so perfectly," reflected Lady Baby, as she mounted the steps; for, as it suddenly occurred to her, Mr Carbury had certainly been a wonderfully convenient tool, always within reach when she required him, always ready to be made use of. But this was not the occasion for thanking him, supposing that he deserved thanks, for already they were entering the hall. "It will keep till to-morrow," she said to herself; and after hesitating for a moment at the foot of the staircase, she walked slowly towards the smoking-room. The dressing-gong had sounded some time back,

but she knew that Peter generally dressed in the last five minutes. She was a little, just a little, bit frightened at what she had done, but not the less determined to know at once the result of her latest experiment. Supposing that Germaine should be right, and that she was going to have "the devil to pay"? Never mind—in fact, all the better. She set her teeth and went in, feeling that she was strung up to anything, even to being called false and fickle, if that were necessary to relieve Sir Peter's feelings.

He was still at the writing-table, scribbling away against time; but he threw down his pen as she entered, and came towards her. "Well, little one," he said, with his usual grave smile, "so you have had your polo after all—and who won the game?"

"The game—the game?" she stammered, quite taken aback, for she had been armed for anger, or at least cold displeasure, and she was not armed for this; "it was no game."

"What was it, then? Terrible earnest?"—and he drew her towards him to look in her eyes.

“You shall hear what it was,” she said, with a sudden display of icy dignity, as she disengaged herself from his arm. “You shall hear what it was—to-morrow,” and, abruptly turning, she left the room.

CHAPTER XV.

LADY BABY HAS HER WAY.

“Profess indeed I do not Cupid’s art,
Nor nourish special locks of rowéd hair,
Nor give each speech a full point of a groan.”

THE harmless, though rather vulgar little joke which Mr Smart had attempted about Nicky coming home “with his pockets full of tin,” had left a disagreeable impression on Lord Kippendale’s mind. He approved of everything connected with horses, except betting; on this one point he was stern. He had lived in unfashionable though very comfortable rusticity all his life, and in the matter of betting-books he had not marched with the time. To his old-fashioned ideas there was something almost of desecration in making a trade of so noble a

passion. Good judge of horse-flesh though he was, he had never made money by his horses ; he was a great deal too impulsive in his decisions and hasty in his transactions. It had almost grieved him to observe in Nicky some traces of the horse-dealer's genius, for Nicky's income was none the worse for a little padding of this sort, but as for the betting-ring he had had no suspicions. Nicky knew well enough what were his father-in-law's ideas on that subject ; and also he remembered well enough the stormy day on which poor George had burst into Lord Kippendale's room, and with much tearing of hair and gnashing of teeth had announced himself to be a beggar, and all because of a Derby debt. It was not quite so bad as that,—starvation was not staring him in the face,—but by the time the debt was cleared, George Blashford was no longer the fairly wealthy man he had been when Lady Catherine Bevan had married him. Kippendale had certainly been singularly unlucky in marrying his daughters, the world decided ; it all came from his not taking time to think over it. No title and no money in one case ;

no title in the other, and the money that there had been gone in one day, like a bubble on the wind.

“That idiot Smart was talking nonsense, of course,” said the old Earl to himself: “but I’ll put the question to Craigtoun; a man with Craigtoun’s pluck is bound to speak out, if there *should* be a wee bit truth in the matter.”

Accordingly, when Nicky came back, which he did on the day after the polo-lesson last described, Lord Kippendale, without prelude or preamble, button-holed his son-in-law, and began: “Look here, Craigtoun, I want a square answer to a square question. You know what my ideas about betting-books are; have you, or have you not, been betting at the Derby?”

If the irascible old Earl had not been the most unsuspecting and short-sighted of mortals, he could not have failed to perceive the start which Nicky gave; and if Nicky had not happened to be standing with his back to the light, Lord Kippendale would have observed that his son-in-law’s usually ruddy complexion had suddenly undergone a very curious change.

"I?" stammered Nicky. "I? what have you been hearing? Surely you know that I——"

"Yes, yes, I know that you are not the wild fellow that poor George was. You have been very steady, Craigtoun, my boy, very steady; and with temptations in your way, too. I was sure from the first that it was nothing but a daft bit of gossip, and I only want your word for it; so speak out, and let's be done with it."

"Really," began Nicky, taking refuge in a sort of virtuously indignant bluster,—“really I should have thought that, after such a spell of time, I mean that, by Jove! I shouldn't have expected,—and upon my word it's hard upon a fellow when he has done his best to——”

Lord Kippendale put his hands over his ears with an expression of agonised impatience. “For goodness' sake, Craigtoun, how long are you going to keep me here? Adam is waiting for me in the stable-yard. I asked for a *word*, not for *words* ;” or to be quite correct, what

Lord Kippendale really said was : "I asked for a *woard*, not for *woards*;" for, in critical moments, Lord Kippendale's vowels had a way of breadthening out in exact proportion to the emotions at work.

Then Nicky's bluster died out, and he felt himself growing livid. He looked at his father-in-law, or rather he gazed convulsively at his shirt-pin; he heard the quick tap of the riding-whip against the table-foot, and he knew that a moment's hesitation would ruin him. And then this man, so celebrated for his courage, whose hand had never trembled and whose eye had never flinched in face of the greatest perils of the hunting-field,—this man became all at once aware that he was a coward, and swallowing something dry in his throat, waveringly pronounced the false word "No." For Lord Kippendale had not considered that there are two sorts of pluck in the world,—the pluck that enables men to mount on vicious horses and take high fences, and the pluck that nerves them to speak the truth under disadvantageous circumstances.

Even though Nicky had to clear his throat twice before pronouncing that "No," the monosyllable was quite enough for Lord Kippendale. "All right—that's all I wanted; I knew it was all right; and with a squeeze to Nicky's hand, he left the room, and Nicky, before drawing a breath of relief, first passed his tongue over his lips, for they were quite dry, while on his cold forehead the drops were standing.

He was still where Lord Kippendale had left him when Lady Baby looked into the room and distantly inquired whether he had seen Sir Peter. Nicky gave an impatient shake of the head, and began heavily to pace the floor, but as she was closing the door an idea seemed to strike him.

"Look here," he called after her,—“look here, Baby, I—I haven't been a bad sort of a brother to you, have I? I—I trained your ponies for you all right, and all that sort of thing, didn't I?”

"Of course you did," she answered, staring; "do you want to be thanked for it now?"

“No, upon my word I don’t; I didn’t do it for thanks. I like training ponies; but still I suppose that if ever you were in the way of doing me a good turn, you wouldn’t mind doing it?”

“Mind doing it? Why, Nicky, I shouldn’t wait till the good turn came in my way, I should go out of my way to do it. You couldn’t have been a better brother than you have been. What has come over you to-day?”

“Nothing. And, look here, I think I have been civil to Wyndhurst too, haven’t I? I’m not a particularly civil fellow generally, but I always was ready to push Wyndhurst’s chances. I made Aggie sit on the drag that day on purpose, that he should have Ajax to ride; and though Ajax *did* throw him, that wasn’t my fault, and it all came straight in the end. Yes, by Jove! I think I’ve been uncommonly civil to Wyndhurst!”

“I daresay you have,” said Lady Baby, suddenly withdrawing the hand which she had laid on her brother-in-law’s sleeve, “but what has that to do with it? And what is

it you want, Nicky? I don't understand you at all."

"Oh, I want nothing just now, at least not this minute; but maybe I'll remind you of this some day,—some day soon," he added under his breath, brushing past her into the passage. "That pushing on of Wyndhurst's suit was the luckiest thing I ever did," reflected Nicky, as he plunged out of the house. "And what are a beggarly thousand pounds to Wyndhurst? The income of a beggarly fortnight, nothing more; and I'll net it again somehow; it's only time that I'm short of just now."

Lady Baby, meanwhile, having puzzled for a few minutes over Nicky's strange behaviour, dismissed the subject and pursued the search for Sir Peter. She found him in a far-off morning-room at last, and walking straight up to him she said, "Sir Peter, I wish to speak with you alone after luncheon."

"*Sir Peter?*" he said inquiringly.

"Yes," she said severely, avoiding his glance. "Will you come to the big drawing-room after luncheon? I shall be there;"

and, without waiting for an answer, she disappeared.

Lady Baby had come down to breakfast that morning looking rather pale, with tight-set lips and a general appearance of having come to a resolution, and of meaning rigidly to adhere to it. There was an ominous silence about her, and occasional flashes of something alarming in her eyes. And yet Sir Peter ate his luncheon with perfect equanimity and strolled quite leisurely into the big drawing-room when the party dispersed.

Lady Baby was there already, a shade paler, a shade more determined than she had been in the morning, and with her chin, if possible, a shade higher in the air.

“Supposing,” said Sir Peter, before she had spoken,—“supposing we adjourn to the conservatory? There is more sunshine than here, and more view.”

The conservatory was very large, and it was square in shape, with a paved way running all round the four sides, while the entire centre was filled up with a mass of tall green-

house plants, the tallest of which brushed the ceiling with their crowns, and formed altogether a small forest, just dense enough to be a screen. There were two entrances to the conservatory — one through a window in the big drawing-room, the other from the flower-garden; and it was to a bench placed beside this outer door, which to-day stood open, that Lady Baby led the way.

The winding ribbon-borders and twisted flower-scrolls in the garden outside had just reached the summit of their brief summer glory. There was scarcely a flower dropped yet, there was not a leaf turned. For some days past the weather had been brilliant, but to-day there were signs of a break. There were those rapid changes from blue sky to grey, those fitful plunges from brilliancy to gloom, which portend revolution. The roses were greedily drinking in the last favours of the precious sunshine, and the scent of heliotrope and ver-bena hung heavily on the warm air. Through the midst of the blaze of well-ordered colour, a gardener would now and then glide discreetly

with a watering-can in his hand; and the distant sound of gravel-paths being raked was all that broke the afternoon silence.

“May I smoke?” asked Sir Peter; “it is good for the plants, I believe.”

“You may do what you like,” she said, frowning, for she felt this was a bad beginning to what was to follow. “You can do whatever you like after to-day, Peter,—I mean Sir Peter. Do you know why I asked for this interview?”

“I have no idea.”

“Have you not even attempted to form a guess?”

“I have not.”

“Well, then, you shall know at once. Sir Peter, all is over between us.”

There was just an instant's silence before Sir Peter spoke. “For what reason?” he asked.

“Reason? reason?” she said, beginning to pant a little; “I could give you a dozen reasons, I could give you a hundred.”

“I only ask you to give me one,” said Sir Peter, folding his arms and leaning back. Whether it was this attitude of patient waiting

which drove the ideas from her mind, or whether it was his steadfast gaze, Lady Baby did not know; but for a minute she seemed to have lost sight of all the reasons to be propounded, and it was only with an effort that she could rally her arguments around her.

“My reasons — yes, I have plenty. In the first place” (oh, what was in the first place? she mentally inquired of herself)—“in the first place, we don’t suit each other.”

“Why not?”

“Because—because we are different; everything about us is different; our tastes differ.”

“For instance?”

“For instance, the thing I like best in the world is horses, and you only care for them if you can paint them. That in itself ought to have been enough from the beginning. I should have kept to the first answer I gave you; it was only the accident that upset my nerves, and made me fancy that I—cared for you, when really I was only sorry for you. Such mistakes are often made, you know. They happen in almost every novel.”

"So they do," agreed Sir Peter. "Well, that is in the first place; now, in the second place?"

"We have no sympathies in common."

"But you have told me that already."

"Well, then," she broke out, "you don't care for me as you should—not as I expected it, not as I wanted it; that is in the second place."

In the programme of the interview which Lady Baby had sketched out for herself, she had proposed to maintain an absolutely icy dignity, but at this juncture the programme flew to the winds, and springing from the bench, she began to pace the paved walk between the flowers, nervously plucking a leaf here and a flower there, and tearing it to pieces with her fingers.

"What is it you did expect?" asked Sir Peter, very gravely.

"More"—"*display*," she was going to have said, but the word struck her as too flippant for the occasion. "More of what is always expected in—in these cases," she lucidly substituted. "And I know the way it generally is, because I know how it was with Nicky and George. *They* cared for Aggie and Kate in

the real way. George would have *killed* any one for whom Kate had shown the slightest preference; perhaps he might even have killed Kate. Don't you know that?"

"I had not the honour of Mr Blashford's acquaintance."

"No; but you know Nicky. Aggie and Nicky were just as devoted in their way. I am quite sure that if I had asked you not to open a newspaper during the last six weeks, I am quite sure that you would have refused."

"I am certain of it," said Sir Peter, in a tone of conviction.

"And," she continued, with an additional quiver in her voice, "I am sure that you would never have thought of reading poetry aloud to me?"

"I am sure I should not."

"Nor of serenading me on the violin?"

"I never learnt the violin," said Sir Peter.

She waved off the objection as being a mere accidental circumstance which could not affect the main principle. "And your conversation is as different as possible from that of either Nicky

or George. Agnes says that George's language was simply unwritten poetry. I am sure that if I had waited for months longer, you would never have compared me either to an angel or a star."

"It is extremely unlikely that I should," agreed Sir Peter.

"And you admire other women as much as you do me,—more, perhaps; don't deny it! I know that you admire Maud."

"I admire Miss Epperton very much."

"Then why don't you marry Miss Epperton?"

"Because I don't happen to care for her."

She came to a standstill in front of him, and, perhaps because she dimly felt that his last answer was unanswerable, she hastened to quit that point. "Enough," she said, clenching her hands; "this is quite enough. All this only shows how right I was when I said that all must be over between us. I have felt it for a long time. Everything points the same way,—that we have made a dreadful, a fearful mistake, and that we must part while there is still time."

Sir Peter laid down his cigar on the edge of the bench and looked her straight in the eyes.

“You wish me, then, to resign my claims?”

“Yes; here is your ring,” and she began hastily pulling it off her finger.

“And you wish me to go away and not to return?”

“Of course; that is just what I wish. It is because we do not suit each other, don't you see?”

“So you have told me.”

“And you think I am right?”

“Very likely you are right. I shall never learn either to speak unwritten poetry or to play the violin,—and as it appears that these things are essential to your happiness, I think you have come to a very wise conclusion.”

“And—and what are you going to do?”

“I shall do as you wish. I shall go.”

“Ah!” she said, with a quick breath that was something like a gasp, and she bit her quivering lip; “but remember that you are never to come back,—never, *never!* Do you understand?”

“I understand,” said Sir Peter, rising, “and you shall be obeyed. Do you wish me to explain the alteration in our plans to Lord Kippendale, or will you do it yourself?”

“Leave it to me,” and she crushed a head of costly begonia into an unsightly pink pulp.

“Then there is nothing more to say but good-bye,” said Sir Peter, putting out his hand. “We need not swear enmity, I suppose, though they do that in novels.” He held her hand in his for a moment, but dismay was bringing the tears to her eyes, and she could not see his face.

“Yes, good-bye ; go at once,” she said, with her head held high ; “and—and remember that this is final,—that nothing, no, *nothing*, could ever make me change my mind again.”

“I should not venture to expect it ;” and, dropping her hand, he turned towards the open door.

“Peter !” she called after him as he reached it—“I mean Sir Peter, remember that I don’t want any one, any friend, to—to interfere, or try and patch up anything.”

“Be quite easy, I shall let no one interfere.”

“Well, then, that is all ; why are you not gone yet ?”

“Because you recalled me. Good-bye.”

“And—and, Sir Peter, you are not on any

account to write to me. I should be *very* angry if you wrote to me."

"I should never be audacious enough to trouble you in that way;" and, having waited for a moment to see if this was the last of her instructions, Sir Peter turned and went slowly through the open door into the garden: his steps sounded on the gravel after he was out of sight.

A chill and threatening breeze was sweeping over the flower-beds; the drifting sunshine had died out, and now, as at a given signal, the whole sky seemed to be alive and moving. In the west a stretch of clear blue was still visible, but across it the white clouds and the black clouds were scudding like smoke; and the white looked as mischievous as the black,—and most mischievous of all looked the bronze-red glare which loomed in the east, tinging the heavens with a wild reflection, almost like the light of a smile on the face of an angry man. Now the rose-bushes began to sway a little and to show the under side of their leaves, and the head-gardener was seen to pause with his watering-can in his hand, and keenly to scan the clouds.

A complaining creak came from the open conservatory door ; the flowers nearest the entrance began to shudder upon their stalks. As plainly as Chinese primroses can speak they were asking to be protected from the unaccustomed rudeness of this air. But Lady Baby was in no mood for understanding Chinese, or indeed any other language. She was standing in a trance, listening to Sir Peter's departing steps upon the gravel. Her head was still erect and her hand clenched, but for all that there was a look of stupefaction on her face. Was he gone then? Was he really gone? Was it all over, so quickly, so easily, without a protest, without a struggle?

“And is this the way it ends?”

She was not aware that she had spoken aloud until some one behind her said, “No, this is the way it begins;” and turning with a start she perceived Mr Carbury advancing towards her between the flowers, looking rather flushed and very much more wide-awake than she had ever seen him look during the whole course of their acquaintance.

CHAPTER XVI.

WHAT CAME OF THE EXPERIMENT.

“I am so much a fool should I stay longer.
It would be my disgrace and your discomfort :
I take my leave at once.”

THERE was something so very strangely timed about the sudden apparition of Carbury in the nick of this particular moment, that Lady Baby, though her acquaintance with the stage was most limited, felt almost as though she were witnessing a well-rehearsed “entrance” in a play. It was Carbury himself who brought this suggestion of staginess in the atmosphere with him, for excitement in him was always apt to take a theatrical shape ; unconsciously he would stalk as though he were treading the boards, and instinctively speak as though he

had studied his part. His black eyes were all in a flame, and his white teeth gleamed joyously, as out of the frame of clustering greenhouse plants he advanced towards Lady Baby. No *coup de théâtre* could have been more complete. "Where *have* you come from?" was all that she could find presence of mind to say; then in a moment she had remembered that the entrance through the drawing-room door was a very simple explanation, and quite disposed of any necessity for trap-doors or secret passages, of which an undefined suggestion had risen to her mind.

"Oh, I see!" she said quickly. "But you have not—heard anything? How much have you heard?" she asked imperiously.

"Enough: quite as much as I wanted to hear."

"Then you have listened? You came to listen?"

"I did not come to listen; I came to ask you a question, but I have got my answer already."

"Your answer?" she echoed, gazing in wide-

eyed wonder. "When did I give you your answer?"

"When you said 'Good-bye' to Sir Peter Wyndhurst." Carbury was still smiling; but a little of the triumph had died out of the smile, and a little anxiety had come into it. He was watching Lady Baby's face keenly, eagerly, almost a little suspiciously. "Yesterday," he said, and his voice shook a little—"yesterday I guessed, but to-day I know."

"Do you?" she repeated; "well, *you* may know, but I am sure *I* don't," and she burst into a childishly impertinent laugh; not because she was amused, but because her nerves were overstrained. Indeed, if she had not laughed then, her only alternative would have been tears. Carbury was not smiling any longer; right through the sunburn of his dark skin his face had grown very pale. The flicker of suspicion in his eyes had turned to a fixed gleam of distrust. "Is this to try me?" he stammered; "is it to put me to the proof that you pretend not to understand what it is that I am here for? is it——"

“Pretend!” she flashed out. “Much need of pretence, indeed, when you start up as though you were struck from the ground, and look mysterious, and talk in riddles, instead of in plain English. It is exactly like the play I saw when papa took me to Edinburgh in winter. Do you know, when you came in just now from behind the flowers, I couldn’t help thinking that if only you had had lace ruffles, and if the flowers had only been pasteboard ones, you would have looked exactly like the hero when he came out of the bushes in the garden, just before the grand declaration scene. Any one would fancy——”

Lady Baby stopped short; it was something in Carbury’s face that stopped her. There was a minute’s complete silence in the conservatory. Outside the storm was coming fast: a wall of white dust rushed across the garden, to be torn to shreds and whirled to the roofs. It had grown very dark, though it was still so early in the afternoon. Over Lady Baby’s face there had crept a look of panic.

“Good heavens!” she cried impetuously,

“you cannot, oh surely you cannot have meant *that!*” and again, in place of any answer, there was a minute of absolute silence. During that minute it all dawned upon Lady Baby. Perhaps it was the stony consternation of Carbury’s eyes that enlightened her, perhaps it was in the silence that she read her answer, or perhaps she owed the revelation to that lightning-like piecing together of past infinitesimal trifles, of which on occasion we are all capable—an instantaneous upstarting of those atoms of evidence which, once the right spring is touched, range themselves suddenly into incontrovertible proof. May it not even be that an experience not her own came to her aid, and that the heroes and heroines of a few hundred novels rose up at this moment to lend a hand in tearing the veil from her unwilling eyes? So blinding was the light let in upon her that she could do nothing but lapse into horror-stricken silence. And Carbury also stood dumb, not because words failed him, but because he never would have risked speaking until he felt pretty sure that he could do so without anything absurd happening

to his voice. For he also had lived through his minute of revelation, he also had put together his patchwork of words and of looks, of atoms of proof and half-formed suspicions; and as he stood there in the first blush of his discomfiture, it struck him that the whole which they produced was like nothing so much as a cunningly devised fool's cap, and that the head which this cap fitted was no other than his own.

He was neither slow nor stupid, and he was almost fanatically vain. There are many sorts of vain men, but, broadly speaking, there are two distinct species—the thick-skinned, complacent vain, and the thin-skinned, morbid vain. Had Mr Carbury been of the first species, he would probably have taken half an hour to be convinced of the mistake he had made; but being a rather extreme example of the thin-skinned order, and being always more ready to suppose that he was being made a laughing-stock of than that he was not, instead of retreating before the proof, he met it half-way. Even before Lady Baby had quite done speaking, he had grasped the situation—the peculiarly

and grimly farcical situation—in which he found himself placed. All its accessories might not be very clear, all its details of cause and effect might take time to unravel ; the only thing that was perfectly plain and intelligible to him was that the past week had been a game, and that he had been duped,—for what end ?—with what purpose ?—did not greatly signify just at present, nor whether he had been toy or tool. What did it matter, so long as the fact remained that he had been taken up and cast aside,—that he, Laurence Carbury, the veteran campaigner, had been as completely and neatly blinded by this young lady just out of the schoolroom as ever was the most whiskerless boy by the most wily of sirens ?

Some men might, at this juncture, have been relieved by realising the very absurdity of the position—the absolutely hopeless tragi-comedy of the case ; but to Mr Carbury it was precisely the absurdity which was the tragical part of the matter. It was nothing but an instinct of self-preservation which, as he stood there, enabled him to maintain this outward composure—belied

indeed by his colour, but respectable at any rate in its effort. The terror of detection was upon him. Hide the injury, hide it at any price! Never mind though the very soul be stunned with the blow; never mind though the heart be bursting, and the dream of yesterday turned to a grinning nightmare,—hide it, cover the bleeding wound; smile down the dismay which must perforce be so ludicrous to watch; swallow the mortification which, once displayed, must surely be as laughable as it is pitiable! There would be plenty of time later to stanch the wound and sharpen the weapons for revenge; but now, quick, a mask, a shield, a screen,—anything to slouch behind. It was this that his writhing vanity groaned for,—this that his wits were wildly casting about for, as he stood there and quite distinctly felt the fool's cap on his head. It seemed to him that, if he moved, he would hear the very jingle of the bells.

In after-days, when the thoughts of Lady Baby or of Mr Carbury went back to this afternoon, neither of them could ever quite clearly remember what had been said during the five

minutes that followed on her fierce, and, as it were, panic-stricken exclamation. Mr Carbury, indeed, had ever after an indistinct recollection of having burst into a laugh—or something that on the whole was not very unlike a laugh—and of having made some remark about the coming storm—perhaps under a passing wild idea that, since he had not spoken in so many plain English words, retreat was still open to him. But in the midst of it he had caught Lady Baby's look of haughty amazement, and, with a groan, he broke off, as though aware that he was wasting his pains. Without another word he turned and walked out bareheaded into the pelting rain. But he kept his head up as he went—he did not forget that he might be seen from the windows. He was conscious of having borne himself very bravely in the five minutes just lived through, and he did not want to mar it all at the last. Until he has reached the privacy of his room, let his poor mangled vanity remain at least decently, if not effectually, covered up.

The thick drops had been falling now for

some minutes ; they blurred the glass-panes of the conservatory, and drove in through the open door upon the shivering plants. A flower-pot fell with a crash to the ground ; the wind howled round the corner ; and a dazed sparrow, helpless as a dead leaf, was borne in by the storm, flapping feebly about among the palms, so blinded with dust and terrified by the darkness that it could not again find the entrance.

Lady Baby sank down on the bench and stared fixedly into the stormy turbulence of the garden. What, oh, what exactly had happened ? Mr Carbury in love with her ? Preposterous idea ! And yet, the first shock once over, she never thought of doubting it. The mask had been too transparent even for Lady Baby's eyes. Pity for him she felt none as yet ; she was far too deeply plunged in pity for herself—far too wild with a nameless pain whose dull stabs she was only just now beginning to feel in her heart. As for weighing for a moment the right that was on his side and the wrong that was on hers, she was

very far from calm enough to have realised even that such a wrong existed. Later the self-reproaches might come, later the remorse. If her conscience stirred just now, it was but faintly; and if anything within her soul at this moment deserved the name of remorse, it was at best a mixed and chaotic sentiment.

It was long before she felt calm enough to leave the conservatory. When she did so, she met her father on the staircase. Lord Kippendale was in a state of boundless excitement.

“The world is gone clean daft,” he announced. “What’s the meaning of every one rushing off in this fashion, as though we had the plague in the house? Eh? What’s the meaning of it? Can no one explain?”

“Every one?” repeated Lady Baby, standing still.

“Yes, Wyndhurst and Carbury; that’s enough for one day, I suppose.”

“Sir Peter is—gone?”

“Bless me, yes! Didn’t he ask for leave of absence? It was a business letter or some-

thing which required his presence at Nolesworth. He went off an hour ago—that's rational enough. It's Carbury who is the crazy one; declared suddenly he had to catch the London night mail—went off at half an hour's warning. It's confoundedly rude to decamp in this fashion without any explanation."

"Perhaps he had a business letter too," suggested Lady Baby, rather faintly.

"Well," said Lord Kippendale, irritably, "it would take a precious deal of business to induce *me* to travel to-night. There's something bad coming; the barometer has not been so low for two years. We are either in for a rattling thunderstorm in the night, or it's going to be a stiff gale. I shall have the chimneys looked to."

The thunder did not come in the night—it had blown over; but the stiff gale came, chasing thunder and rain before it, roaring and howling and bellowing round the house like twenty thousand mad bulls let loose. Through long hours of the darkness Lady Baby lay

with her eyes wide open, listening to the booming in the chimney, to the rattling at the shutters, to the whistling through the keyholes, uneasily looking back on the day that was past, and fervently wishing, as she tossed about from side to side, that she had let well alone, and had stopped short of at least her last experiment on Sir Peter.

In the morning two of the big beeches on the lawn were down, and there were broken branches snapped into little bits of wood scattered all over the grass, and flung even against the windows. The flower-beds were as thoroughly destroyed as though they had been trampled by a marching army, or as though the bellowing bulls had been bodily monsters, and had thought that calceolarias and lobelias were pleasant things to roll upon. But this was too little yet for the gale; it just held its breath in the daylight hours, and then burst out anew on the second night.

News began to be heard of fatalities occasioned. A child in the village had been hurled against a wall and badly hurt; a man

had been injured by the fall of a chimney. "And it is not confined to Scotland," said Lord Kippendale, as he read his paper at breakfast on the second morning of the gale; "it has been blowing twenty to the dozen all over England. The world is certainly gone crazy. November is the time for these big gales, not June. There it is: sixteen men wounded by the fall of a factory wall; loss of a boat and seven lives; two women crushed by a tree trunk. Why, it must have been worse down there by a good bit. We have been let off easy this time."

But Lord Kippendale had not been let off quite as easy as he imagined. On the afternoon of that same day there suddenly arose a commotion in the house. Lady Baby, sitting alone in her room, alternately listening to the wind which still howled lustily round the house corners and writing letters to Sir Peter, which she immediately tore up and burnt carefully at a candle, all at once became vaguely aware that something had happened. She had heard no great noise, no scream,—and

yet, by one of those indefinable instincts that sometimes seize upon us, she felt in one instant convinced that "something" had happened, and that it was something great and important, perhaps even something terrible.

There had been a ring at the door, then steps, then silence; and then again steps, more hurried this time, more doors opened and shut, her father speaking, Agnes speaking, her father speaking louder, calling for somebody, for Nicky, for Germaine, loudly declaring that something or other was nonsense, but doing so in a tone of alarmed defiance. "What? Eh? Rubbish?" she heard. "It can't be. I don't believe a word of it. It's badly written too. Give me my glasses, Germaine! Where is Germaine? Why doesn't Germaine come?"

Lady Baby was at the foot of the stairs by this time. Her father was standing near the billiard-table with a paper in his hand, there was a boy by the door turning a greasy cap between his fingers, and there was an orange-coloured envelope on the floor.

“Agnes,” and she put her hand on her sister’s arm; “Agnes, what is it? A telegram? Has anything happened to——”

“I don’t know,” said Agnes, in tremulous perplexity. “I don’t know what has happened. I don’t understand. I don’t believe; but there has been an accident——”

“To whom?” asked Lady Baby, shaking her sister’s arm.

“To nobody; it was at Gullyscoombe. It was the gale. Wasn’t it the gale? I am not sure what has happened, but it is something dreadful about the mines at Gullyscoombe.”

CHAPTER XVII.

TABLE DECORATION.

“ Being your slave, what should I do but tend
Upon the hours and times of your desire ?”

WHERE was Germaine while Lord Kippendale shouted for him? Not very far off, only as far as the dining-room, where he was engaged in helping, or, to speak more truly, hindering Miss Epperton in her arrangement of the flowers for the dinner-table. Maud was never known to be idle; and Germaine, of whom the same could not generally be asserted, had lately developed an interest in all sorts of mixed occupations. When Maud was arranging books in the library, Germaine was apt to become suddenly interested in literature; when Maud was practising waltzes on the piano (she had discovered that a good

waltz-player is generally a welcome member of society), Germaine, of whom his sisters used to assert that his only chance of distinguishing between "Rule Britannia" and "Pop goes the Weasel," was to hear them played in immediate succession,—this same Germaine would stand by the hour with bated breath, completely and entirely happy in turning over pages. Sometimes he would drop the books upon her toes, and sometimes he would not, and generally he would turn over the page of music at the wrong moment,—in either case he was very much in the way, but so eager to do right, and so penitent after doing wrong, that no one would have had the heart to discard his assistance. At any rate Miss Epperton had not.

On the present occasion Germaine had begun by breaking a crystal flower-trough, and had followed this up by sitting down in a basket full of geraniums, so perhaps it was no wonder if the process of table-decoration occupied rather more time than the filling of a few vases and the disposition of a few ferns generally requires.

"It is all I can do to make the table even

decent to look at," said Maud, trying with her fingers to impart a little straightness to a battered verbena. "Just look at these little bits of wreck! Lord Germaine, don't you think that, instead of standing in my light, you might make yourself useful?"

"But I thought I was being useful," said Germaine, opening his eyes a little wider.

His present phase of usefulness consisted in sitting on the edge of the table and plunging his two hands alternately into the basket of cut flowers. "I thought I had done a great deal already."

"So you have: you have broken one glass trough, and chipped another; also you have put an end to most of the geraniums, and you are at this moment pulling to pieces the one cherished moss-rose which I had destined for the centre-piece, and in one other minute you will have brought the table-cloth down and scattered my fern-mosaic to the four winds of heaven."

"I am *awfully* sorry," said Germaine, plunging to his feet, and dropping the moss-rose as

though it had been a hot cinder. "Can I do anything else for you? Shall I carry all the troughs back to the sideboard? or empty out all the baskets, or something? Or," more doubtfully, "are you going to send me to gather flowers? Please don't; you know I always pull them the wrong length."

"No," she laughed, "I shall not set you to gathering flowers again in a hurry. Take these scissors, please, and take this basket of verbena, —so."

"What am I to do to them?" asked Germaine, gazing at the verbena with the eye of a man who is prepared to go to any extremity.

"Do exactly as I tell you. You are to clip off the spoilt flowers, and leave only the good ones. Do you see?"

"All right; I shall do exactly as you tell me," and Germaine began fervently and energetically to make the scissors click.

"If I were not so abjectly afraid of that head-gardener," said Maud, "I would have made another excursion to the flower-beds. You have got such an extraordinarily grim set of family

retainers about you,—they look as if none of them had been in the place under forty years.”

“Forty years!” repeated Germaine, with a stare. “Why, some of the housemaids are quite young.”

“I daresay,” laughed Maud; “of course it is only a *façon de parler*.” She had found already that Germaine was sometimes a little stolid and literal in his way of taking up a passing remark.

“What is a *façon de parler*?” he asked.

“Oh, it is a sort of loose general assertion that is not meant to bear dissection. Don’t you see?”

Any one else would have said “I see,” whether they saw or not; but Germaine did not quite see, and so held his tongue and vigorously slashed away at the verbena.

“But about the forty years,” he began presently; “there is Jemima, for instance, the kitchen-maid, forty years ago her mother may not even have been born.”

“Mercy!” cried Maud, laughingly putting her hands to her ears. “I concede everything; my forty years were selected quite at random.

Perhaps there is not a servant in the house who has been here so long."

"Oh yes, there is; there is Adam. He has been with us more than forty years, almost fifty, I think. He is a capital old fellow."

"I have no doubt of it; but that particular class of capital old fellow is a little terrifying. Ever since I heard the details of his family history, I have quailed before Adam's eye."

"Why?" asked Germaine.

"Just think of the icy rigidity of a man who, without a pang or a struggle, could turn his wife out of the house, and refuse ever to see her face again."

"But," said Germaine, "she had behaved atrociously—she had deceived him."

"I know; but think how young they both were. She was a mere child, it seems. Would he not be quite the upright man he now is, even if he had had the amiable weakness to forgive her?"

"Forgive her! Do you mean taking her back and trusting her again? Is that what you mean by forgiving her?"

“ I mean not condemning an ignorant creature to life-long misery and degradation, because, dazzled by childish vanity, she had begun by making a fatal mistake. Don't you understand ? ”

“ No, I don't understand. It was not a mistake ; it was a downright acted lie. And how could she be more degraded than she was already by that lie ? ”

“ A lie ? Yes ; but who is to throw the first stone at the liar ? I suppose the people who tell the white lies think themselves entitled to throw stones at the people who tell the black ones. ”

“ Then there are the people who don't tell lies at all. ”

“ Dear me ! ” said Maud, with a thrill of uneasiness. “ Do you really believe in those people ? ”

“ I should think I do, ” said Germaine, stoutly, “ and you are one of them yourself ; you know you are. ”

Maud laughed a little loudly and unnaturally.

“ You are wrong, Lord Germaine. I remem-

ber telling a most shocking fib on my fifth birthday. It was something connected with strawberry-jam and my aunt's store-cupboard."

Germaine looked genuinely distressed. "I am so sorry," he murmured; but after a moment he brightened, and added: "But I am so glad that you were only five years old; and then you were a girl. I wonder what my father would have done if I had told a fib about strawberry-jam? I daresay he would have beaten me, even on my birthday."

"Truth-speaking is one of his hobbies, is it not?" said Maud, rather absently.

"Hobbies?" repeated Germaine.

"That is again a *façon de parler*," and Maud gave a little start. Germaine's complete subjection to her will and undisguised adoration had the effect of occasionally throwing her off her guard; but, oddly enough, there were moments when his steady pertinacity in taking up a word, and his persistency in following up an idea, had caused her almost some embarrassment. In such moments her mind would be touched by the passing question as to whether,

for all the clearness of his big blue eyes, and for all the infantine candour of his smile, she had quite measured the height or quite sounded the depth of this boyish giant's nature?

"Scotch truthfulness is proverbial," she said rather hurriedly; "and yet in this very case did not your father act as intercessor?"

"My father has got fits of being soft-hearted."

"And you," asked Maud, "have you got fits of being hard-hearted?" She smiled at her own question; this curly-haired boy looked so much more soft-hearted than the irritable old Earl.

"Well, I don't know; but I think Adam was in the right that time, and my father in the wrong. Look, Miss Epperton, I have done the flowers."

"Yes," said Maud, gazing rather dreamily at the heap on the table, "I see that you have done them,—in fact you have done for them. There are next to nothing but stalks here."

"I cut off all the spoilt ones," said Germaine—"you told me to. I took great trouble to do the thing thoroughly."

"Yes; and as about nine-tenths of the flowers

were more or less spoilt, you took me at my word and left me just the one-tenth which is not. Do you always do everything as thoroughly as this, Lord Germaine?" and Maud held up three inches of stalk, from which Germaine's merciless scissors had clipped all but one solitary pink star.

"Have I done it all wrong again?" he asked humbly.

"You have dispensed rather stern justice, that is all;" and then for a minute Maud was silent, slowly turning over the wrecks of the verbena. "Did he love her, I wonder?" she suddenly observed.

"Who?" asked Germaine. This time it was Maud whose thoughts were tenaciously clinging to a subject supposed to be put aside.

"Adam. Did he love the girl he married? That destroying angel whose favoured victim he was?"

"Molly? Adam was just wild about her, I believe."

"And yet he consented never to see her face again. Oh, why could he not have given her

one other chance? Perhaps she loved him. She may have been vile in everything else,—she must have been vile; but if she loved him—just think, if she loved him! Perhaps he could have saved her from herself; even if she was false to others she might have been true to him.”

Maud broke off abruptly, and tried to smile away the tears that had sprung so suddenly to her eyes. She had spoken much more vehemently than she was aware of, and, but for the wonder on Germaine’s face, she might have said more. How could he know that it was not the case of the long-dead fisher-girl that she was pleading? How could he guess that, in a dim and indistinct way, she felt as though she were pleading her own; and that what made her cheek flush now and her eye glisten was a craving scarcely understood by herself—a positive hunger to hear from his lips some sentence less stern to the guilt of falsehood than that which he had already pronounced? Germaine saw only that she was deeply moved by what he explained to himself as a divine tenderness

of womanly compassion, and he saw also that this emotion made her look more lovely than he had ever seen her look. Not even as Cleopatra had she been quite as beautiful as this, for as Cleopatra she had had no tears in her eyes.

"I am talking nonsense," Maud was saying, quickly. "Of course you cannot understand me. I was sorry for the girl, that is all."

"Why should I not understand you?" said Germaine. He had grown rather pale, and his heart was thumping almost audibly under his shooting-jacket. "I know that good women feel for each other, but I did not know that good women feel so much for bad ones; it can only be because you are so—so extra-good," said Germaine, bashfully yet resolutely coining a word for the occasion.

"Don't speak like that," said Maud, quickly; and at that moment it struck her that it would be but a small thing to give up all her chances in life in order to make herself into the sort of woman which Germaine so obstinately took her to be. Yet in the very height of the sensation she clearly understood that it was but a momen-

tary madness—a passing “fit of the virtues,” and that she never had been that woman, and never would be.

“You are always telling me not to speak,” burst out Germaine; “you are always stopping me and turning off the subject, and just when I am about to say——”

“When you are about to say what?” asked Maud, faintly. It had become clear to her all at once that somehow the crisis was reached, and that Germaine was going to declare his love, and ask her to become his wife. To her great surprise, she discovered that she was trembling — actually trembling; she, Maud Epperton, who had heard this same question from so many lips, which, unfortunately, had been the lips of ineligible men—men without fortunes and without titles. But though she trembled, Maud was yet cool enough to glance rapidly over the situation, and put to herself the question, “Is this the moment? May he speak?” The answer was, “Yes, he may speak.” There was nothing to be gained by further delay, and there were some things that

might be lost. The marvel was that she had been able to proceed thus far unmolested ; and though as yet, thanks to her own discretion, his simple - minded relatives regarded Germaine's infatuation merely as a harmless boyish malady, still any day might betray her own motives a little too early. Therefore Maud said to herself, "Yes, he may speak."

"I won't be stopped any more," Germaine was hotly declaring. "You know what I want to say ; it is nothing particular," he stammered, rosy-red now as a schoolgirl, and tugging away at an unhappy button,—“at least it is only that I—no, that you are the most beautiful and the most perfect woman in the world, and that I love you more than all the rest of the world put together, and that you—no, that I——”

"Hush!" said Maud, sharply turning her head, "what is that?"

"Nothing ; I suppose you want to put me off again?"

"No, I don't ; indeed I don't ; but there is some one calling," and just then Lord Kip-

pendale's voice was heard again shouting for Germaine. "Something has happened," said Maud, just as Lady Baby had said to herself. "Something has happened. Lord Germaine, you must go."

Germaine was at the door already. "Wait for me here," he called back, with a glance of desperate entreaty. "I daresay it is nothing particular, and I shall be back directly. If you mean to be good to me, wait for me here!"

And Maud must have meant to be good to him, for she waited. This time the interruption was not of her making, and her foot tapped the floor impatiently as she sat there in the big empty dining-room with the half-filled flower-troughs around her. But, though she waited very long, Germaine did not come back.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE "BLUE-BELLS."

"I have seen the hungry ocean gain
Advantage on the kingdom of the shore."

"I DON'T believe a word of it," said Lord Kippendale, standing with the open telegram in his hand. "Drowned? Eh? What's drowned? Wha's drowned? I've heard of men drowning; but as for drowned mines, it altogether beats me. Eh? What's it all about?"

"Papa," said Lady Baby, who, curiously enough, felt more relieved than aghast, "I think it means that the sea has somehow or other got into the mines."

"Which is as much as to say that the mines are swamped," said Nicky, who on the

whole was the most practical member of the family.

"Swamped? Nonsense! Why can't they get the water out again by the way it came in?"

"I don't know," said Nicky,—"perhaps they can; but this telegram looks ugly. Captain John wouldn't telegraph without reason."

"No, I suppose he wouldn't,—not that telegraphing at all is much good. Surely Captain John can manage the pumping out, or whatever it is, without me."

"But," said Nicky, "there may be the whole sea to pump out, in which case——"

"In which case," said Lord Kippendale, testily, "I certainly should not be of more use than he."

No one quite grasped what really would be the consequence of the case suggested by Nicky. They were all rather stunned and stupefied, and on the whole more bewildered than panic-stricken. Gullyscombe and the Gullyscombe mines had always been such a

distant thing to their minds, that it was impossible in one moment to realise the full weight of what had happened, or even thoroughly to understand it. With the exception of Lord Kippendale, they none of them had so much as seen closely a mine of any sort; and if Agnes or Lady Baby had been asked off-hand for their definition of the article, they probably would have described it in a general sort of way as a hole in the ground which occasionally collapsed and occasionally exploded, and where unfortunate miners sometimes got suffocated and sometimes got their necks broken. Also they understood that mining as an occupation was dirty and untidy work, but exceedingly lucrative to the people on whose estates these untidy holes were situated. To both Agnes and Lady Baby it appeared a comparatively simple matter to get the water out of the hole by the way it had gone in.

“And they seem to expect an answer,” said Lord Kippendale, taking up the telegram again; “they ask what they are to do, as if I could

tell them! I have never known Captain John to be so helpless before,—holloa!" and he stopped short suddenly, and stared at the paper; "the telegram isn't from Captain John at all, it's from one of the foremen. What's the meaning of this?"

What indeed could be the meaning of it? they all asked themselves, with a distinct increase of alarm. This was the first question to be settled, and now that it was suggested, Lord Kippendale was on thorns already to have it answered. An inquiry was wired to Gullyscoombe, but it was not till towards the end of dinner that the butler brought in another orange envelope on a salver.

During the whole afternoon Lord Kippendale had shown himself loudly confident and sanguine, but his hand was shaking a little as he cut the envelope. They all watched him intently as he read, but he had scarcely glanced at the paper when he rose to his feet and looked about him with a shocked and perplexed air. The others rose instinctively, and asked, "What is it? Is it from Captain John?"

“No,” said the Earl, “it is not from Captain John. Captain John is killed—drowned in the mine.” He dropped the telegram and sank back in his chair, and then they all stood for a moment and looked helplessly into each other’s faces.

For now the panic had seized them, now only they began to realise what had occurred. Captain John’s death was something far more distinct and palpable than the swamping of all the mines in Christendom. This brought the blow home as nothing else could have done, and it was from this moment only that the catastrophe began to be recognised as such. Captain John’s death had supplied the standard by which to measure it.

No one seemed inclined to finish dinner, and presently they were all in the drawing-room, a little pale, a little agitated, some of them subdued and others excited, giving out opinions, making suggestions, surmising, commenting, and throwing out questions, as people do in these moments of bewilderment, without stopping to wait for the answers.

"It is quite evident that they have all lost their heads without Captain John," said Lord Kippendale, desperately pacing the room. "I am not a mining engineer, but I shall have to send one down, I suppose. Something will have to be done, and I shall have to see Reid" (Reid was Lord Kippendale's man of business). "Good heavens! there will be no end of a bother. Craigtoun, see that a groom is mounted immediately—there will be half-a-dozen telegrams to send off; and look here, some of you girls come and help me," and seizing on a lighted bedroom candle, Lord Kippendale dashed off to his writing-room, and became almost happy in inditing telegraphic messages, for telegraphing was ever to him a congenial occupation.

There was nothing like connected conversation or social intercourse that evening; the butler was discussing matters with the upper-footman in the servants' hall, and had forgotten to have the lamps taken to the writing-room. Lord Kippendale sat scribbling by the light of one candle; and by the light

of another candle, Lady Baby, kneeling before an ottoman which she was using as a table, and feeling her brain all in a whirl, was sending peremptory messages to the Gullyscoombe workmen to pump the water from the mines. Maud Epperton was silently and deftly laying ready the telegraph-forms, while her face looked quite as grave as that of any of the family; and in the drawing-room Nicky sat plunged in gloom, and Agnes gazed towards him as if for comfort, but found none.

Next day Mr Reid came. He was a chronically startled-looking man, owing to the upward and bristly propensities of his reddish hair. He looked a great deal more startled than usual to-day, and his face grew very long as he examined the Gullyscoombe telegrams, of which there had been several more since the previous night.

“It looks bad, very bad,” said Reid.

“Then is it your opinion that the mines are lost?” asked the Earl, who would have preferred even an unfavourable verdict to this nerve-trying suspense.

"My opinion on the subject is worth nothing," explained Reid. "These telegrams look bad, but it is quite possible that in the first shock and flurry the case may be taken for worse than it is; besides, the gale is still blowing, and would naturally interfere with all attempts at rescue. It does not seem quite clear, either, how many of the mines are drowned."

"No," said Kippendale; "and it would be too preposterous to suppose that they were all three swamped together."

"But they were all in connection," observed Reid, "were they not?"

"Yes; so I understood."

Mr Reid said nothing, but looked one degree more startled.

"Then what is to be done? Am I really expected to go down there myself and ladle out the water?"

"There will be time enough to think of going down when we have the engineer's report; that is the first step. As I understand it, these cases differ so widely in each individual instance, and depend so entirely upon accidents of the soil,

that no one but a mining engineer can pronounce a verdict. But there is no cause for premature despair."

"Despair? Oh, you don't catch me at that. The sea may have locked up the 'Blue-bells,' but it can't have carried away all the copper at Gullyscoombe, you know, Reid. Though neither you nor I are mining engineers, we may be pretty sure of that, I suppose, eh? The biggest tide there ever was can't have washed Gullyscoombe clean of copper."

Mr Reid relaxed into a smile, and said something that might pass as an agreement; but the smile was wavering and the tone doubtful, and when he got back to his office his hair was standing more than usually on end.

There passed three days of inaction and waiting. Lord Kippendale fretted and fumed, and wished ten times a-day that he had gone to Gullyscoombe himself. The first brunt of the shock was over by this time, and the rest of the family had settled down into comparative calm; for they were now at that treacherously peaceful stage when the edge of a disagreeable surprise

is passed, and when ultimate consequences are not yet foreseen. As yet these consequences were mere visions of air; there was nothing that could be taken hold of and felt as a palpable result of the catastrophe. The mines at Gullyscombe were drowned, perhaps even irretrievably drowned, but dinner was served just as punctually at Kippendale; the cream was just as thick, and the toast as well buttered at breakfast as it had ever been. Of course there were qualms and questionings; but they were put aside as being possibly uselessly self-tormenting.

At last came Mr Grey, the engineer, with his report. It was brief to cruelty; the mines were lost.

"All?" asked Lord Kippendale, standing still and staring hard into the face of Mr Grey. This engineer was a man who had incidentally been employed on small jobs at Gullyscombe, and Lord Kippendale had on this occasion walked to the station to meet him. He was a middle-aged, sensible individual, without the shadow of a characteristic about him, except

just that he was middle-aged and sensible.
“All? Do you mean that all are lost—all three?”

“That is what I mean. Your lordship is aware that the three Blue-bell mines were all connected underground; the drowning of the one necessarily entails the drowning of the others.”

Lord Kippendale walked on for a few steps, looking like a man who has received a blow on the head.

“How was it?” he said at last, slowly.
“How did they manage to get drowned at all?”

“The old story—incautious blasting.”

“But Captain John was the most cautious Christian alive.”

“Yes; but he is a Choughshire man, and every Choughshire man with a pick in his hand and a good lode before his eyes is a match for the devil in the matter of reckless daring. It's a fever with them; it lies in the blood. I have known of a hundred cases in point. The men tell me that the face of the roof was stuck thick with the richest copper they had ever cut, and

they were a good way from the water yet. Of course the temptation was great. It was hard to leave it untouched; a little more, and then only a little more—that is the way they put it. Captain John had more than once declared that it was the last blast he would allow. Unluckily, he allowed just one too many."

"Is there any life lost besides his?" asked Lord Kippendale, with a shudder.

"No; and he need not have lost his, if it had not been for his mad attempts to save the mine. This is how it was, Lord Kippendale;" and Mr Grey, standing still, drew two lines on the gravel with his stick. "Your lordship is aware that the passages under the sea had been worked already to a distance of from three to four hundred feet below high-water mark. Let us call this first line high-water mark, and let the next stand for low-water mark. The spot where this fatal blast took place lay a little distance—only some dozen yards—above low-water mark. The tide was out at the time, but was just beginning to rise. When, therefore, it became evident that the blast had been over-

charged, and that the roof of the mine was pierced, the water, not having yet risen to this spot, did not burst in immediately in a volume, but began by sending showers from the advancing waves, which ran very high then, for you must remember that this was on Wednesday afternoon, when the gale was pretty nearly at its highest. The rent in the roof was a comparatively small one, and it appears that Captain John entertained some hopes of blocking the aperture before the tide came in. At the moment of the first alarm he was at the shaft-head. The cages came up full of men; they had given up hope at once, and made for the cages in a panic. They tell me he waited quite quietly till the last man had disembarked, and then got into the empty cage and gave the down-signal. They would have refused if they dared, but they had always been mortally afraid of him; so the cage was lowered. At the last moment, after it was in motion, three or four of the most reckless jumped in after him. Twenty minutes later the up-signal was given, and the cage came up with all but the Captain.

They were dripping wet, and they said that the Captain had refused to follow them. The cage was lowered again, but there was no signal, and it came up empty. It was only next day that the body was recovered."

Lord Kippendale was angrily switching off the heads of dandelions, and angrily blinking his eyelids. "I—I never thought the old fellow was such a fool," he angrily observed. "Why, it's just about suicide."

"Foolhardy, unquestionably, but his madness was not without a touch of method. It is even imaginable that under normal circumstances his rash attempt might have succeeded. But it is not more than half-a-dozen times in a century that the wind blows as it did on Wednesday; consequently, the rush and the force of the water were such, that long before anything efficient could be done the sea must have dashed over the aperture and torn it wide. The crust of rock, even where not broken, was naturally weakened; yards and yards of the roof must have come down. It is impossible to say how many, but it is quite certain that

the damage extends to far below low-water mark."

"Which means?" asked Lord Kippendale, staring blankly at the two lines on the gravel.

"Which means simply that every shilling spent in attempting to save the 'Blue-bells' would be just as advantageously laid out if made up into paper parcels and dropped into the sea. The miners have recognised this fact, and the consequence is that there are nothing but long faces about. It is really rather appalling to contemplate how many men have been thrown out of work by that blast."

Lord Kippendale looked away with a groan. He had almost forgotten that, though he was the chief sufferer, he was not the only one. Then, pulling himself together, he began to ask spasmodic questions—questions which had been asked already, and answered too, but which the engineer answered again with professional patience and professional directness. When the engine was mentioned, the professional man smiled a little.

"I stopped the engine. It had been working at high pressure for forty-eight hours, and the water had not fallen by the eighth of an inch."

"And yet the copper is there!" cried Lord Kippendale, frantically; "tons and tons of it. Copper doesn't melt like sugar, I suppose?"

"Yes, it is there," replied the engineer, deferentially but drily; "tons and tons of it, as your lordship says; but you will never bring another ounce of it to grass. I have my detailed report by me, if you wish to have it submitted to you,"—Lord Kippendale made a gesture of agonised deprecation;—"but, in point of fact, the matter resolves itself into the four words that I began with: the mines are lost."

Again Lord Kippendale walked on unsteadily.

"Then," he began, speaking with unwonted slowness, "what is the next thing?"

"The next thing, in my opinion, is to survey the rest of the estate for whatever mineral may be beneath its surface. There seems to be a very general belief at Gullyscoombe that a second

vein of copper does exist, and that it is workable; but my time was so short, and my investigation so hurried, that I failed to gather any accurate information on the subject."

"Well, there is Swan's copper, of course," said Lord Kippendale, speaking still like a man half-dazed.

"Christopher Swan?"

"Yes. How do you happen to know his name? He has been dead these thirty and odd years."

"I heard his name at Gullyscoombe. When I explained to them that the 'Blue-bells' were quite as dead as their poor old captain, they said just what your lordship has said—'Well, there's always Swan's copper.' And then I inquired what was meant, and they told me."

"I thought there would be a way out of it somewhere," said Lord Kippendale, beginning to pluck up a little of his spirit. "We'll transplant the machinery, and open the new vein, and call it Wheal Swan; upon my word, we will. Yes, that's the very name—Wheal Swan. Capital idea that! eh?" and Lord

Kippendale, very much tickled at his own inspiration, indulged in a genuine laugh; and there is no saying whether, in that hopeful moment, he did not prophetically see the pick-axes gleam, and prophetically hear the buckets swing in that newly christened Wheel Swan of the future.

Mr Grey did not seem nearly so much tickled by Lord Kippendale's idea as was Lord Kippendale himself.

"Does your lordship not think," he observed respectfully, "that before we make up our minds about cooking our hare, we had better first catch it?"

"Bless me! that can't be very hard surely; every one seems pretty certain that Swan's copper is there."

"Yes; but every one seems equally uncertain as to where it should be looked for. As I told your lordship, I have hitherto failed to ascertain anything beyond——"

"Yes, yes, so you told me; but that's no reason why you should go on failing. If the thing has ever been there, it's there still, unless

the pixies have wished it away. It can only be a matter of time and money. I shall go down by to-night's mail. I have had enough of sitting here with my hands tied, and getting information in spoonfuls."

And accordingly, that same evening Lord Kippendale started for Gullyscoombe.

CHAPTER XIX.

MAUD MAKES HERSELF USEFUL.

“I could heartily wish this had not befallen ; but, since it is as it is, mend it for your own good.”

THE whole party came to the doorsteps to see Lord Kippendale off, gazed rather sadly after the departing carriage, and retreated rather silently from the door when it had disappeared. As Maud Epperton was in the act of turning, she perceived that Lord Germaine was hovering about undecidedly, while his eyes, wistful and interrogative, were fixed upon her face.

“Have you any books to arrange in the library ?” he diffidently inquired. “Or don’t you think that the flowers in the dining-room want changing ?”

“I—I don’t think so ; I am not quite sure,”

said Maud, a little incoherently. "I have to see about something in my room first," and without looking into his face she turned and mounted the stairs. She mounted slowly until she was out of sight; but once in the long passage above she broke into a run, and with one panic-stricken look across her shoulder, flew swiftly along till she reached her own door, which having entered, she hastily closed and locked almost as though she feared that Germaine would follow even here.

"It must not be — it must not be," she panted, sinking on to a chair. "It cannot be now; I must wait."

This was not the first time that Maud had flown thus to the privacy of her room. For the last few days she had been continually on the strain, and it had taken all her ingenuity to avoid those *tête-à-têtes* with Germaine which formerly she had been equally ingenious in contriving. For, the first excitement of the catastrophe having subsided, it had become patent to Maud that Germaine, in the guilelessness of his twenty-three-year-old heart, fully intended to

take up the thread of their last discourse exactly where it had been dropped. The idea that their relations to each other were to be in any way changed by reason of the catastrophe, appeared not to have dawned in his mind. But it had dawned long since in the mind of Maud. Even before the advent of the engineer with his report, the plain word *ruin* had commended itself to her most careful consideration.

Now it does not necessarily imply that a woman is absolutely heartless and entirely worldly, because she very distinctly sees how foolish it would be for a penniless girl to pledge her faith to a ruined man ; it only implies that she is very sensible. And in this way Maud was sensible. Until some light fell on the future of Germaine, she felt that it would be madness to listen to his addresses. This state of uncertainty could not last long, and absolutely her only course now was to adopt the tactics of evasion. The simplest solution of the difficulty appeared to lie in flight ; there could be no doubt that a temporary withdrawal from the scene would relieve the worst of the

tension. But here two difficulties presented themselves. In the first place, Maud did not know how to effect a flight without appearing to abandon her friends in their trouble. And in the second place,—ah yes! it was this second ~~place~~ that after all was the rub,—in the second place, where, in the name of all that is homeless and penniless in this wide world, *where* was Maud to fly to?

Sitting in her room to-night, she passed the entire string of her acquaintances in review; but at each member of the imaginary procession as it marched past she despondently shook her head. It was the worst possible moment for offering visits in any quarter. At this stage of the season country-houses were empty, and town-houses were packed to their last available inch. No; rack her brain as she liked, Maud could think of no roof under which she might propose to lay her head. There was always Brackton, of course, but that meant despair—despair and an unpaid rent next quarter. But problems of this sort are occasionally solved overnight.

Soon after luncheon next day Lady Euphro-

syne was announced. She had come over to pay a visit, half of condolence and half of inquiry. Reports of the family misfortune had, of course, reached her, but they were hazy and contradictory, and Lady Euphrosyne could not rest until she had learnt the truth. There was also a second point on which her soul was plunged in perplexing doubt, a doubt composed of hopes and fears, and the combination of this general incertitude turned her normal composure into tremulous agitation.

Lady Baby and Maud were both in the drawing-room. At the sound of the visitor's name, Lady Baby's face grew rather white, but she advanced with resolution to do her duty as hostess.

"I am so sorry to hear that your father is gone," said Lady Euphrosyne, retaining the small limp hand rather longer than was her wont, while her faint eyes gazed almost eagerly into the girl's face. "I suppose he had to go about this wretched mine business; I hope, I really hope that matters may not be so bad as they appear." This was expressed with an approach to fervour so obviously genuine that

both Maud and Lady Baby gazed in surprise. "Of course, I could not keep away when I heard such bad news," went on Lady Euphrosyne, still scrutinising the face before her; "I made a point of driving over, even though half my correspondence has been left unanswered. I felt far too anxious to sit at my writing-table. And then as to Peter; I am devoured by anxiety about Peter—I cannot imagine what has taken him from home so suddenly; but no doubt you can enlighten me?"

"Is Sir Peter not at Nolesworth?" The question was put by Maud. Lady Baby said nothing, but her great blue eyes were devouring Lady Euphrosyne's face.

"No, he is not," said Lady Euphrosyne; "he went off in the most inexplicable way—to London, it appears. It must have been something pressing, but of course Frances knows all about it. Ah!" with an apparent inspiration, "perhaps he has gone on special service? You have given him some commission in London? Has he not perchance been intrusted with the choice of an artistic bonnet?"

Lady Euphrosyne did not often make jokes, and those that she did make were rarely successful.

“I have given him no commission,” said Lady Baby; “I——”

“No? But what account does he give of himself in his letters?”

For one minute longer Lady Baby continued to stare rather wildly into her visitor's face, then abruptly tearing herself away, she turned unceremoniously and burst from the room.

Lady Euphrosyne looked after her in such agitation that she dropped her card-case. As she turned to pick it up, Maud Epperton held it towards her.

“Dear Miss Epperton, began Lady Euphrosyne, in a still unsteady voice, for her nerves were very far from having regained their balance, “can you explain? What is it all about? What does it mean? This conduct is so exceedingly strange, so entirely contrary to all custom.”

“I am as ignorant as yourself,” said Maud, thoughtfully drawing her black brows together.

Immersed as she had been in her own personal dilemma, Maud had never thought of puzzling herself over Sir Peter's prolonged absence, but at Lady Euphrosyne's question her curiosity was stirred.

"What?" cried Lady Euphrosyne—"living in the same house with her? Do you know nothing? Has there been no explanation?"

"Of what?"

"Why, of Peter's departure. Has there been any—any little difference between them, do you think?"

"Not that I know of; and I don't think the rest of the family know any more than I do."

"And yet it is quite clear that something is wrong between them."

"Yes, it is quite clear that something is wrong," acquiesced Maud.

"I wonder that her father has not moved in the matter—it is a week now since Peter's departure; ah, but, to be sure, *what* a week!" cried Lady Euphrosyne, answering herself—"it must indeed have been terrible! You

were in the thick of it, of course, Miss Epper-ton—you must know all about it; tell me—it is only natural that I should be concerned, you know—tell me what is the extent of the misfortune? Will they be—will they be—absolutely ruined?”

“I trust not,” said Maud, quickly; “but I fear, I fear very much, that they will be seriously impoverished,—at any rate for a time.”

“That is bad enough, quite bad enough!” cried Lady Euphrosyne, nervously fingering her parasol. Maud was watching her curiously. “Excuse me, Lady Euphrosyne,” she said, after a moment, “but, after all, it cannot affect Sir Peter very much.”

“Not affect him?” repeated Lady Euphrosyne, thrown off her guard. “Oh, you don’t know Peter. Why, a misfortune of this sort is the very thing to bring him back to her feet,—supposing that they are at this moment estranged, as I have every reason for trust—for believing,” she finished.

Maud said nothing, but gazed with an ex-

pressionless face at the carpet. Lady Euphrosyne took instant fright, and began to ask herself what she had said, and whether she had better unsay it, or say it a little more distinctly. For a minute she stood quite helpless before Maud. It was wonderful how very small the great woman of society became in face of even this trifling emergency. Her studies of life had been all in one direction; she knew the right way of entering and leaving a drawing-room; she could have sent in a roomful of mixed guests to dinner without giving even the most susceptible among them cause for feeling himself slighted; but as to deciding a question like the present, she was as helpless as the most inexperienced bride whom she had ever assisted through the ordeal of her first dinner-party.

“Don’t you see,” she tremulously resumed, having come to a sort of wavering conclusion that she had gone too far to retreat, and speaking, therefore, in a tone of ostentatious frankness—“don’t you see, I never could bring myself to approve of this engagement. I am

convinced that this marriage would be Peter's undoing. Peter, though he is young in years, has quite the ways and the ideas of an older man; and just look at this child with her sixteen years—or is it seventeen? And her wilfulness and her whims! How could she possibly make him happy? Don't you see what I mean? You are so sensible, dear Miss Epperton. I am quite sure you see what I mean."

And Maud saw what she meant; in fact it was not difficult to see. Lady Euphrosyne's pet scheme of keeping Sir Peter unmarried was an open secret to the world. And by this stage of the conversation Miss Epperton saw through and through the experienced woman of society opposite her, just as though she had been a figure cut in clear glass. For a moment her beautiful upper lip curled, as it were, in faint contempt; this new suavity of Lady Euphrosyne's tone had in it something almost sickening; the eager glimmer in the pale-blue eyes seemed to Maud more repulsive than the most steely glance that had ever fallen from them to confuse and confound the

most luckless blunderer in the mysteries of etiquette. But why? Wherefore? Maud asked herself rapidly, even as she mentally recoiled, whence was this sugar-sweetness taken? From what was this glimmer struck? Obviously something was to be gained; was it her help? Could it be in the character of an instrument that Lady Euphrosyne was wooing her thus condescendingly? An indignant answer trembled on Maud's lips; it was all but spoken, when suddenly, as in a flash, she saw her chance. In the pale-blue eyes before her she read the answer to the problem of last night. "Keep friends with Lady Euphrosyne," her common-sense said within her—"keep friends with Lady Euphrosyne; go the length, if necessary, of letting her believe that she has found her instrument. Make yourself, or allow her to fancy that you are making yourself useful—either will do, and here is the roof you want over your head. Keep your wits together. Of what good will it be to any one—of what good even to your friend Lady Baby—if you flare up in a fine

flash of virtue, and stamp your foot at Sir Peter's step-mother?" All this passed through Maud's mind very quickly, and instead of the indignant words which had trembled on her lips, she made some answer evasive enough to soothe her own conscience, yet encouraging enough to induce Lady Euphrosyne to proceed. And Lady Euphrosyne did proceed, as Maud had rightly surmised. What the elder lady chiefly yearned for at this critical juncture was a confidante on whom to lean. Though her acquaintance with the girl was but superficial, yet it had existed for years. And, if report spoke true, Miss Epperton's discretion and skill were always to be counted on.

"And don't you see," went on Lady Euphrosyne, as she warmed to this idea—"don't you see that, of course, I am very anxious to ascertain the state of the case? but it looks so rude to ask point-blank—such very bad taste—and there is nothing I abominate so much as anything in bad taste; *cela ne se fait pas*, you know."

"If you are very anxious about it," said

Maud, quietly — “and after all, you have a right to know—I daresay I could find out for you, without asking point-blank. I suppose that would be in good taste; *cela se fait*, does it not?”

The question was put with that air of referring to the decision of a final court that Lady Euphrosyne loved so dearly. If there was a slight twitch at the corners of Maud’s mouth, Lady Euphrosyne did not see it, and Maud knew perfectly well that she could afford the luxury of that twitch.

“Naturally, of course, there would be no objection to that,” answered Lady Euphrosyne, still with that unwonted eagerness. She had quite forgotten to be exhausted to-day. It was delightful to be met thus half-way in her wishes, and she thought she must have been very clever to have manœuvred so quickly to this point. “It is very kind of you, Miss Epperton, to undertake it. I am sure you will use all your tact in—procuring me the information which, as you justly observe, I have, of course, the right to possess. I have always

heard that you have a great deal of tact for your age." For a moment the tone of serene patronage reappeared; but Maud, unlike Lady Baby, was used to being patronised, and she could bear it quite well. "And if there is anything decisive to be communicated, you might send me a little note, or come over to see me. I shall always be very glad to see you, Miss Epperton. I don't think I ever saw enough of you in London; I must try and manage to see more of you in future. I shall make an effort,—the spectacle of a young person who has both tact and taste, and who respects *les convenances*, is so very gratifying, but, alas! so rare."

"You do me too much honour," said Maud, with a smile which was perfectly sincere—for was not the refuge she coveted growing more distinct every moment?

Lady Euphrosyne gave an affectionate squeeze to Maud's hand. She was quite fascinated by the girl. That little speech about doing too much honour might have come straight from a printed treatise on the manners of good society.

“*Au revoir,*” she said, as she moved to the door; “and if you *do* let me have a little note, Miss Epperton, please don’t forget to mention what news there is about that dreadful place down there with the mines. I pray to Heaven that our friends may not be beggared!” cried Lady Euphrosyne, with a return of the fervent mood; “for the very next thing to happen then would be Peter coming back to offer his fortune as a stopgap.”

“I suppose so,” said Maud, thoughtfully; “but I wonder——”

“What do you wonder, dear Miss Epperton?”

“I wonder whether it would be taken.”

Lady Euphrosyne stared a little.

“Not taken? What common-sense would there be in refusing it?”

“Not much, I confess; but, great heavens! Lady Euphrosyne,” cried Maud, in one of those impulses which sometimes overpowered her, “after all, there are a few other things in the world besides common-sense. There is pride, for instance.”

“ I suppose there is,” said Lady Euphrosyne, doubtfully. “ Yes, I suppose there is pride,” she repeated in a rather more hopeful tone ; and having once more slightly pressed Maud’s hand, she departed, meditating deeply upon this new idea, and cheered by the consciousness that she had established a secret communication with the heart of the citadel. Miss Epperton would be quite as useful as a professional spy, or even as an underground passage.

It was not till two days later that Maud found the opportunity of taking her first step in Lady Euphrosyne’s service. This was during a late afternoon walk which the two girls were taking together in the park. That morning Lord Kippendale had telegraphed that he would be home by night. There was no other news in the telegram. He did not say how his business at Gullyscoombe had sped.

The gale had blown for more than a week, but now at last the winds had gone back to their caverns, and every leaf hung motionless. Signs of the ravage were visible everywhere. There were bald crowns and bare branches

where the trees had stood most exposed ; the beeches and lime - trees drooped wearily, as though worn out with the long buffeting ; the dog-roses in the hedges had been torn to pieces, and the long grass hung full of their scattered pink petals ; brackens and lady-fern were dashed and tangled into mud-soiled clumps ; the very daisies and buttercups all lay with their heads in one direction, all blown one way, with as little spirit to rise again as though they still felt the iron yoke upon their necks.

“ They have not got over their fright yet,” said Maud, as she stooped to gather some of the crouching daisies. “ Poor things ! don’t they look like whipped children that are still in disgrace ? Look at all their poor little noses turned to the wall ! ”

“ It is very stupid of them to lie down in that way,” said Lady Baby, indifferently ; “ things that lie down only get trodden on.”

“ But things that stand up sometimes get knocked down. You can’t expect a daisy to rise in armed rebellion like a piece of prickly furze ; it would be out of character.”

“Then I am glad I am not a daisy. Life would not be worth living if one were expected to lie down and be meek, and if there were no way of letting out one’s temper at intervals.”

“Take care!” said Maud, laughing; “you really should not let it out so violently. A golden-haired vixen is an anomaly; it does not answer, I assure you. In order to regulate your temper artistically, you require to consult the colour of your hair. The darker your hair is the more temper you can afford to have. If you are very fair-haired, you are bound to be an angel; but if your hair is black, you are welcome to be a demon. There! That’s the system in a nutshell,” added Maud, gaily. “I make you a present of it for whatever it is worth. It sounds almost like one of Sir Peter’s theories about artistic necessities, does it not?” As she introduced the name Maud glanced obliquely at her companion—for she had a little private curiosity of her own to satisfy, quite apart from Lady Euphrosyne’s mission. There was no need of deep scrutiny here; the

brilliant colour that sprang to Lady Baby's cheek could not have escaped the most cursory observation.

"Sir Peter has got some very ridiculous theories," she observed, pointedly, turning away her head.

"She talks of him as *Sir* Peter," reflected Maud, making her first note.

"Artists generally are a little peculiar," she said aloud, "or, as some people put it, ridiculous; but even the most peculiar artists cannot expect to be always agreed with."

"I don't know about other artists," said Lady Baby, rather hotly; "but I know that Sir Peter does not care one bit as to whether I agree with him or not—he does not care one bit about any thing I do."

"Oh, you don't quite mean that; you can't mean that, surely?"

"Don't I?" said Lady Baby; "I do." She had been fighting her battle within the locked chambers of her heart for a week past; she thought herself quite strong enough to do without advisers, and yet, before she was aware of

what she was about, she had, at the very first invitation, put the key in the lock, and was letting the door stand ajar.

“But surely you have not been quarrelling about any of these ridiculous notions—I mean his theories, his peculiarities?”

“Of course not,” she said disdainfully. “We have not quarrelled at all, but only I have sent him away—for the present. I have considered it better that we should not see each other again—for a time.” She did not mean to let Maud know that her engagement was broken off; in point of fact she did not consider that it was irretrievably broken,—she did not intend to let that inner door stand further open than just ajar, but neither did she know that Maud Epperton’s eyes could look round corners.

“Of course,” she went on to explain, “one can’t always agree; and he has such a way of taking things quietly. I can’t stand that,—I mean he requires to be broken of the habit.”

“And in order to break him of the habit you have sent him away. How long is he to be kept in disgrace?”

“Until he asks my pardon, of course!” flashed out Lady Baby, regardless of consequences.

“And are you quite sure that it will not be the other way?” asked Maud, with a flicker of slyness in her smile.

“What other way?”

“Are you quite sure that it will not be you who have to ask his?” A retrospective glance at many incidents of Mr Carbury’s last visit had enabled Maud correctly to construe the phrase about Sir Peter taking things quietly.

“*I ask his pardon!*” said Lady Baby, putting up her head and breathing rather fast; “I should like to know what for? I would rather never see him again than ask his pardon.”

“She is as proud as a young Satan and as obstinate as a mule,” said Miss Epperton to herself. “I believe that if she wanted to get to the other side of a stone wall, and there was an open doorway before her eyes, she would find it preferable to put down her head and dash her skull to shivers, rather than take her passage

at any spot but the one on which she had fixed her mind."

"Well, to be sure," she said presently, "matters will most likely not come to that extreme; it will not be a question of asking pardon, but a question of hurrying back to give sympathy in this new trouble." But, even as she said it, it struck Maud that Sir Peter could scarcely be described as "hurrying" himself with this object.

"Ah! you think so too? Yes, I am quite sure the news will bring him back, and I shall be so glad." She broke off and bit her lip, as having said too much.

"Yes, I suppose you will be glad, doubly glad, at this crisis."

"Why doubly?"

Maud kept her eyes fixed on the distant hills. She knew quite well that that *doubly* had been faintly emphasised, and she knew quite well the reason why. There could be no doubt that the little germ of curiosity first awakened by Lady Euphrosyne's surmises had grown very much more lively during the last two days. Questions of this sort always interested Maud.

Unable herself to afford the luxury of being proud, she liked studying the quality in others. It would have interested her greatly to ascertain whether her estimate of the Bevans' character was correct, and to measure to what length exactly the folly of pride could be pushed. But Lady Baby's stare disconcerted her, and it was almost with a little confusion that she hastened to point out that, of course, at a juncture like the present, the more friends one had the better it must be, and Sir Peter in his position towards them would naturally be more to be counted on than a mere friend, &c., &c.; out of all of which, however, Maud's curiosity got not even the shadow of a satisfaction, for the reason that Lady Baby never once comprehended that she was being sounded. The question which just now was present in Maud's mind lay such miles and miles out of her own range of thoughts, that it would take a much broader allusion to bring it within her notice. Her blue eyes looked almost stupid in their utter want of understanding. All that she felt was that there was something in Maud's words which she somehow failed to grasp

—something that might perhaps be turned over and examined at leisure.

She asked for no further explanation at present, for by this time they were traversing the stable-yard on their way to the back entrance. In the middle of the yard stood the dogcart from which the horse was just being led.

“What? Is it so late?” said Lady Baby; “they have been to the station already. Papa must be back. Adam!”

A younger groom put his head up over the dogcart to explain that Adam was at the house. His lordship had sent for him directly he returned.

“What can he want Adam for?” said Lady Baby—“he is not a mining engineer;” and with aroused curiosity the two girls hurried to the house.

CHAPTER XX.

SUSPENSE.

“One woe doth tread upon another’s heel,
So fast they follow.”

LADY BABY went straight across the hall to the door of her father’s writing-room and opened it. Lord Kippendale sat leaning back in his leather arm-chair, which he had pushed from the table. He looked flushed and heated. The dust of travel was upon his coat, and his white hair tumbled about his forehead showed how hurriedly the hat had been thrown off. Exactly in the middle of the room stood Adam, as upright and as rigid as his rheumatic limbs would allow him, quavering out some sentence which broke off short at the opening of the door.

“It’s all right, Maud; come in,” said Lady

Baby to Miss Epperton, who had followed thus far, but now drew back at sight of what looked like a strictly private conference. "Papa, Maud can come in, can't she?"

"By all means," said the Earl, with a sort of fictitious and querulous briskness; "by all manner of means. Perhaps Miss Epperton's wits can devise an escape from the fix we're in: mine are at the end of their tether, I confess." He laughed, not very joyfully. "Go on, Adam," he said, drumming with his fingers on the leather padding of the chair—"and then, you said——"

"And then, m' lord, I just said what I tell ye. I says, says I: Weel, weel, we canna baith hae her—meaning Molly, m' lord," Adam sternly interpolated; "and dinna ye think it's fair play to let the lassie tak' her ain choice? And it may be, m' lord, that I just straughtened mysel' up a wee bit as I said it, and gied a wee jerk doon to my coat; for Christie was aye a shilpit, shauchlin' bit body, and I was no' jist that ill-lookit i' thae days, m' lord," said Adam, straightening himself unconsciously as though

in illustration of his story, and giving the identical "wee jerk doon," with the identical fingers that thirty-two years ago had given it; but, alas, alas! how those poor fingers shook, and how loose the coat hung on the old shrivelled figure!

"And it may be," said Adam, resuming his story, "that summat that I said, or summat that I lookit, just put his bluid a bit up; for oot he skirls (but it was sair mixed up wi' sweerin', m' lord) that I needna tak' siclike airs to mysel' jist for that I was strauchter nor him, and taller nor him, and that I needna be sae dooms sure o' gettin' the lass, seein' that lasses were aye as fond o' siller as they were o' straight backs. 'And whaur's yer siller?' speirs I; 'a' the warld kens that ye're a feckless loon, wi' no' sae muckle as ae saxpence to rub again the tither.' At that he skirls the louder, and strikes his heel again' the airth. 'Doon there,' says he—'it's doon there that my siller is the noo; and it's no' siller aither jist the noo, it's copper; but it'll want no more nor a pickaxe to turn it into saxpences, you jist

bet your soul on that,—ay, and a fine lot o' saxes too!' And more o' the sort he gaed bletherin' on, touchin' this copper that he kenned o', and nae ither mon kenned o' but himsel'. And when I says to him quite cool, 'Dinna ye brag to me, Christie Swan; I ken fu' weel that ye'd think nae mair o' tellin' a lee than of swallowin' ane of yon pilchards to yer supper,' he flies oot wi' mair o' his sweerin'—that he'd wish to be struck deid if he werena speaking the truth, and that the day wudna be lang o' comin' when he'd have money enou' to dress Molly in silk and satin frae heid to fit, ay and in velvet too, if her fancy lay that way; and how many yairds o' velvet did I think I could get oot o' my groom's wages? 'Weel, weel,' says I, 'dinna fash yersel' ony further, Christie, mon—it may be that ye've had a stroke o' luck for aince in a way; I've heerd tell afore this that the deil's aye gude to his ain. But if yer news is true, what for hae ye no' been to m' lord wi't afore this? Or maybe this copper o' yourn's on some ither grund than m' lord's?' At this he bursts out laughin'.

‘What ever put that in your heid?’ says he. ‘Oh, the grund’s m’ lord’s sure enou.’ And then o’ a suddent he seems to recollect himsel’, and pulls up short and turns gey whitelike. Did I think he was going to hing his secret to the clapper o’ the parish-bell? Folks might call him daft, but he was wise enou’ onyway to keep his own counsel and to tak’ what he knew to the best market, ay, and at the best time; but meanwhile mum was the word,—and he stares roun’ aboot in a kin’ o’ a scare, to see if ony ane was listenin’. It seemed to me that the cratur was nearhand ready to bite his tongue oot for what he had let slip to me. And there’s the heid and the tail o’ what I ken, m’ lord,” finished Adam, abruptly.

“And there was nothing more definite than this? Absolutely nothing? Think again, man—think again!” And springing from his chair, Lord Kippendale excitedly paced the room.

Adam thought again; but despite all questionings, the only other fact elicited from him was, that on the day following the interview last described he had met Christie Swan issuing

from the back-yard with a very "mystarious" expression of face, and with a bundle of sticks under his arm; and that, on being questioned as to what he was after, he had very darkly hinted something about being bound on another copper-hunt. "Much copper, indeed, may ye rin to earth," had been Adam's scornful rejoinder, "wi' they daft bits of stick that in Scotland we wudna think fit to drive a decent hog wi'." To which Christie had answered that they were not "daft bits o' stick," but "dowsing-rods," and had trudged off, grinning more mysteriously than ever, and with a finger laid knowingly to the side of his nose; which sight of him was the last that Adam ever had, as that same day he had started north with my lord, and that same week the safe was robbed.

Lord Kippendale sank once more despondently into his chair. "You see our fix now, Miss Epperton," he said, turning with an impatient laugh to Maud. "Can you suggest any further question to be put to the witness, or shall we dismiss him from the box?"

Maud all this time had been sitting by, perfectly silent, but a great deal more attentive than Lady Baby, who had more than once attempted to hurry the proceedings. "There is just one thing that has occurred to me," she said now. "May I ask him one question, Lord Kippendale?"

"A hundred, if you please."

"It is—it is this," said Maud, with a little hesitation, as she turned towards the old groom: "Did Molly—I mean, did your wife know anything about this discovery of Christopher Swan's?"

"She may hae known," said Adam, looking surprised at the question. "I wadna sweer she didna."

Maud pushed her questions further. Did Adam think it unlikely that Christopher should have boasted of his discovery to Molly, as he had boasted to him? No, Adam thought it was "gey likely." Christie Swan, for all his slyness, was the man to do anything that was imprudent, seeing that he was, as Adam put it, "some jum-melt i' the jeedgment." Had Molly never

dropped any remark which indicated her knowledge of its existence? Upon this question Adam reflected for a minute or two, and finally fished out of his memory a tolerably distinct recollection of Molly having on one occasion importuned him for a velvet gown, and of his having reflected within himself that no one but Christie Swan could have put that notion into her head, seeing how he had bragged that he would dress her in velvet from top to toe.

“Oh,” said Maud, “it is as I thought. I had a notion that Molly was more or less in the secret.”

“But, bless my soul, Miss Epperton!” broke in Lord Kippendale, who had been listening with a puzzled air to Maud’s apparently pointless questions, “what odds is it whether she was or not? She’s, you know—she’s——”

“She’s deid, m’ lord,” finished Adam, quite steadily, as the old Earl hesitated. “She’s been deid this thirty-one year, miss,” he added, turning a perfectly unmoved and rigid face towards Maud, who knew quite well that Adam’s wife had only been dead ten years, but who was

quick enough to guess that her real death-day, in Adam's opinion, had been the one of her disgrace.

"Yes, yes, I know," said Maud, hurriedly. "Well, it was only an idea that crossed my mind. It isn't of much consequence."

"Upon my soul and honour!" cried Lord Kippendale, bringing the flat of his hand down on the table, "I begin to believe that Swan never found any copper at all, and that the whole thing, from beginning to end, was a simple unadulterated lie of his invention. Adam, you can go."

Adam moved to the door; but he appeared to have something still on his mind, for he hesitated with the handle in his fingers. "There is jist ae pint, m' lord," he croaked out at last—"not that I wish to be ower positive either; but I've kenned Christie Swan to tell lees, and I've kenned him whiles to tell truth, and I kenned his look when he was leein', and I kenned it when he was truth-tellin'; and, m' lord, it's my belief that he wasna leein' thon day." And with this Adam turned the handle

and hobbled out. Nothing but his loyal desire to soothe the evident anxiety of his master's mind could have induced him to commit himself to a statement so unqualified.

"And this is all we have to count on!" cried Lord Kippendale, as the door closed behind Adam — "the boast of a jealous lover to his rival, made thirty-two years ago, and the rival's impression that the jealous one was not telling fibs on this particular occasion. This, then, is the foundation-stone on which our future fortune is to be built!"

"Not much of a foundation-stone, I confess," said Maud; "but look at it in the light of the first link in a chain, and it cuts a very much better figure."

"But where's the second link? What made you put those questions to Adam about his wife?"

"It struck me that if it were proved that Swan had betrayed the clue to her, it would not be stretching probabilities very far to suppose that she had betrayed it to some one else, and there is no reason why this some one else should

not still be alive. From all I have heard of this woman, I have a firm conviction that she was morally and physically incapable of holding her tongue. If the secret ever was in her keeping, the chances are ninety-nine to one that it has leaked out."

"But leaked out when, and to whom?"

Maud shrugged her shoulders.

"To one of her victims, possibly. You forget that she was the Destroying Angel. If it is true, as I am told, that she had a new sweetheart every week, just think what temptations she must have had for betraying the old one's confidences."

Lord Kippendale stared hard at his guest.

"Bless my soul, Miss Epperton! I'm heartily glad that we haven't got any undiscovered criminals in the house just now. You're as bad as a detective."

"I have some humble talents in that line, I believe," said Maud, laughing. "It has very often struck me that female detectives ought to command a high price, and that there is always that between me and starvation. But what do

you think of my theory? I don't know that I think much of it myself; it's only a forlorn-hope."

"It won't do," cried Lord Kippendale, relapsing into despondency. "Even granting all your arguments, why should our offer of reward have failed to produce this some one else? I have come back from Gullyscoombe as wise as when I started."

It was but too true. Lord Kippendale's journey had resulted in a blank. The vague, floating tradition concerning the copper-vein appeared on closer investigation to be as hard to substantiate as the generality of vague, floating traditions. "Swan's copper," which in the course of years had come to be talked of quite confidently as a sort of treasure laid by, no one exactly knew where, against a rainy day, now that the rainy day had come appeared not only to be not forthcoming, but its very existence was called in question,—at least by the higher authorities, for amongst the miners and fishermen about the place the implicit faith in "Swan's copper" was not to be shaken. The

story of his boasted discovery had grown into a fixed popular belief, but not even the firmest of the believers could throw a single ray of light upon the locality. In vain were the oldest inhabitants—a few bent-backed old miners and fishermen who remembered Christie Swan—questioned and requestioned, their accounts varied in all particulars, except in point of being utterly valueless. The one thing on which they agreed was that the “dowsing-rod was in it.” Christopher had never been so busy with the “dowsing-rod” as just about that time; and, as everybody knew, Captain John himself had commended to his lordship’s most special notice a whole bundle of the rods which had been found in Christie’s room when they searched it for the diamonds.

Maud’s theory concerning Molly’s inability to hold her tongue did not seem to throw any new light on the matter. It was ingenious, but Maud herself confessed that it was far-fetched; and after all, it was only one of a dozen other theories which in these agitated days started up, to be then cast aside as useless.

Dismay was now advancing with rapid strides at Kippendale.

“What is the next thing now?” asked Lord Kippendale during an interview with Reid.

There were constant interviews now, sometimes at Kippendale and sometimes at Mr Reid’s office, and there were constant letters and telegrams passing backwards and forwards.

“The next thing is to wait for Mr Grey’s report,” said Reid.

“Grey’s a fool!” burst out Lord Kippendale. “Either there’s no copper there or Grey doesn’t know his business; the stuff can’t be so deucedly hard to find.”

“On a surface of four thousand acres?” remarked Reid, turning his reddish eyebrows into two very high arches.

“Well, well, we’ll give him a little more time, then. So there’s nothing to do but to wait, eh? Hope it won’t be for long,” he added with a stormy sigh.

“I sincerely trust not,” said Mr Reid, quite

as fervently, though less stormily ; “ every hour of this kind of waiting is a matter of so many pounds, shillings, and pence.”

“ Are we — are we short of cash, Reid ? Already ? ”

“ Not quite yet ; but your lordship forgets that every day since the mines stopped working has been all outcome and no income. Engineers' bills are not remarkable for their shortness. I see a great many unpleasant possibilities on ahead, and not so very far on ahead either.”

Lord Kippendale departed homewards in great perturbation of mind, leaving Mr Reid in his office not much less perturbed. Mr Reid knew exactly to what extent Kippendale was already mortgaged ; and he knew also that for the last thirty years Lord Kippendale had hardly ever succeeded in living within his income. Broadly speaking, the source of this income was now cut off short ; for, despite its four thousand acres, the surface of Gullys-coombe was of small value. It consisted of low hills, bare, arid, and sterile, let out for

the most part in sheep-farms, which brought in the lowest conceivable rent. As for Kippendale, it was, as Maud had called it, nothing more than a big pleasure-ground. Mr Reid had seen very many families ruined in his day, but he had generally watched them sliding, more or less gracefully, down a slope of misfortune that was more or less inclined. In his entire professional experience he had never known another case that was quite so sudden, quite so much like a pantomime transformation-scene, as this collapse of the Kippendale fortunes. It is not very often that people have their eggs so exclusively confined to one basket. That basket had now fallen flat to the ground, so what wonder was it that Mr Reid looked rather rueful as he contemplated its contents? He spent the rest of that day in going conscientiously into the state of the family affairs, which, of course, Lord Kippendale had never gone into himself. By the evening he did not look very cheerful. He foresaw no great difficulty in raising the first sums required; but supposing the search for

this fabulous copper-vein should become indefinite? Supposing it should drag on for years, as many another search had done? The thought caused all Mr Reid's hair to stand straight on end. "A name to back us up," he murmured pensively over his calculations; "some solid capitalist in the background to give confidence to the public—that is what we want to pull us through. If that plaguy copper is there at all—and considering this obstinacy of the popular faith, I rather agree with his lordship that there 'must aye be water where the stirkie droons'—then it's only a matter of inspiring enough confidence and raising enough money; but I'll eat my big ruler if I know how to do it."

After a few days Mr Reid cheered up a little, for he thought he had an idea. Next time he saw Lord Kippendale he took an opportunity of sounding his client very cautiously regarding this idea.

"Any news to-day?" Lord Kippendale had asked on this occasion with his usual impatient snort.

There was no especial news, it seemed, except

that the distress at Gullyscoombe was daily spreading. From the hundreds of miners thrown suddenly out of work many urgent if illiterate appeals had been forwarded by the foreman, who was temporarily supplying Captain John's place, with humble inquiries as to whether his lordship could not find other employment for the many idle hands now forced to lay aside the pick which for so long had been the support of their families. The foreman himself ventured to call his lordship's most gracious attention to the fact that he had worked in the "Blue-bells" for nine years, and that he was a married man with an invalid wife and fifteen children, and that consequently every day of inaction brought him a little nearer to starvation.

"Bless my soul!" said the old Earl testily, "what is it they expect me to do? I can't have them all down to Scotland, and set them to work raking the Kippendale walks, can I? or grooming the horses? And even if I did, it wouldn't be much good, since I don't know where I should get the money from to pay

their wages. It isn't my fault that the mines are shut up; why do they come bothering me? And yet, hang it all, Reid! we can't let those fifteen children and all those other wretches starve, after all; can't one do something for them?"

Reid looked up with a startled glance, for he knew his client well. Lord Kippendale was quite capable of making his case more hopeless than it was by some absurd act of generosity.

"Do something for them? My lord, I decidedly protest; your lordship must remember that you have children of your own."

"Not fifteen, the heavens be praised!" cried the Earl, striding about the room. "But, look here, Reid, we don't seem to be getting forward. Let's discharge Grey, and try some one younger and brisker. We've only Grey's word for it that the 'Blue-bells' are lost. I've a notion of having heard somewhere that leaks are sometimes stopped by sandbags; why shouldn't we give the sandbags a try?"

"It is quite a different sort of bag that is

wanted to stop the leak here," said Mr Reid, with a measured smile.

"And what sort is that?"

"Gold-bags, my lord."

"Ha, ha! upon my word, Reid, that's not so bad! First time I've ever heard you make a joke; only it would tickle me a vast deal more if you could tell me where they're to come from."

"Perhaps I might even answer that question," said Mr Reid, still smiling, "if your lordship would first answer another of mine."

"Well?"

"Where is your prospective son-in-law at this moment?"

"Wyndhurst? Don't see the connection of subjects."

"Well, I should have thought that there was a good deal of connection between Sir Peter Wyndhurst and gold-bags." Mr Reid, being a little exhilarated by the effect of his first joke, as a teetotaler may be exhilarated by the merest nip of wine, had been carried on to make this second somewhat poorer attempt. But he did

it tentatively, with his eye on Lord Kippendale, and the words were not well out before he saw that he had overshot the mark.

“Good heavens, Reid! Are you suggesting that I am to ask Wyndhurst for money?”

Mr Reid, quite sober again after his momentary exaltation of spirit, hurriedly changed his tack, and assured Lord Kippendale that all he had meant by the reference to Sir Peter's gold-bags was to call his lordship's attention to the fortunate circumstance that, however great the pecuniary loss might prove, his lordship's mind could not fail to be greatly eased by the reflection that one of his children at least would be magnificently provided for. Having children of his own, he knew the anxieties of a father; and though, as his lordship said, fifteen children were no doubt harder to provide for than four, still even this number presented cause for serious reflection, &c., &c.

After all, Mr Reid had not completely failed in the object he had at heart, for he sent Lord Kippendale away asking himself what on earth had become of Sir Peter all this time, and

wondering when he would be back from the business journey on which it was understood that he was gone.

It was not many days after this that Maud and Lady Baby were engaged in a somewhat desultory game of billiards in the hall. Not more than a few languid strokes had been played, when a note was brought in for Miss Epperton. It was from Nolesworth, as Lady Baby could not help seeing by the envelope.

Maud, having opened it, uttered a sharp exclamation of surprise, and glanced instinctively across at Lady Baby. The glance was troubled: in the sudden pang of terror that came over her it seemed to Lady Baby that it was compassionate. She felt that she must either see that note or die. She did not say "May I see it?" but as her eyes met Maud's she put out her hand, and Maud, after another glance at the note, and a moment's hesitation, passed it silently across the billiard-table.

The note, penned very hurriedly, ran as follows: "I have heard from Peter at last; only a few lines written on board his yacht in

Plymouth harbour. He sailed on Tuesday for the North Sea. *Do they know?*"

Lady Baby having read it, said nothing, but tossed it back across the table, and the billiards were resumed. She even made some rather better strokes than she had made that day, perhaps because she was playing absolutely at random.

The billiards were not nearly concluded when the library door opened, and Lord Kippendale appeared on the scene.

"Still at it?" he exclaimed; "who has been beating, eh?" He came up to his daughter, and gave a paternal pat to her head. It was a very affectionate pat, and within the last few days he had indulged in a good many of the sort. Lady Baby had only been vaguely aware of them, as also she had been vaguely aware of an unexplained increase of affection on the part of both Nicky and Agnes. There seemed to have arisen a sort of tacit understanding that she was to be treated with something like reverence. Ever since it had been noticed that she was looking pale, there had been quite a bustle of

little attentions around her—of glasses of port wine being sent up to her room, and of footmen appearing at odd moments with cups of strengthening broth, which, mistress of the house though she was, she was not conscious of having ordered. But Lady Baby had not yet arrived at asking herself what it all meant.

She now withdrew rather stiffly from her father's caress. "Nobody has beaten anybody yet," she said; "we have not nearly done."

"But the conclusion may stand over," said Maud, thinking she perceived a desire on the part of Lord Kippendale to be left alone with his daughter, and being herself only too happy of the chance of escape.

Maud was not far wrong. She had scarcely disappeared above-stairs when Lord Kippendale abruptly asked Frances to follow him to the library.

In the library both Nicky and Agnes were installed. Agnes put out her hand and drew her sister to her side, kissing her cheek in silence. Nicky, with more than brotherly courtesy, wheeled a comfortable chair towards

her. "My dear child," began Lord Kippendale, "there is nothing like getting to the point. It is in order to ask you a question that I have called you in here: When do you expect Sir Peter to return?"

The question put thus to Lady Baby was the natural outcome of the one which for two days Lord Kippendale had at intervals been putting to himself. Of course he was not going to accept Mr Reid's suggestion in the sense that Mr Reid had meant it; still Lord Kippendale would have been more than human if at this juncture he had not felt truly thankful to Providence for having ordained to his daughter such a husband as Sir Peter, and if the comforting conviction had not gradually forced itself on his mind that no man with such a son-in-law could ever be regarded as ruined beyond retrieval. His attention once directed to Sir Peter's prolonged absence, his anxiety could not fail to be aroused. It was not without a certain misgiving that he put the question, "When do you expect Sir Peter to return?"

"I don't know," said Lady Baby. Her head

was well up, and from beneath her downcast lashes her eyes gleamed with a perilous brilliancy.

“Does he write often? Have you heard from him lately?”

“I heard *of* him to-day.”

“Does he mention the date of his return?”

“No.”

“I must say he takes things mighty easy,” said Lord Kippendale with a shrug. “It strikes me that a little human sympathy would not have been out of place in a moment like this.”

Lady Baby said nothing. She had not sat down on the comfortable chair; she stood beside it with one of Agnes’s softly cushioned hands clutched fiercely in her own. Lord Kippendale looked at his daughter’s face. “Nothing wrong?” he inquired, with a sort of anxious jocularly: “he hasn’t been refusing his fences lately, has he?” There was no response, and Lord Kippendale altered his tone.

“What is the business that took him away? What is he looking after now?”

“Herrings, I suppose,” said Lady Baby, calmly.

“Wha-at?”

“Herrings—a fish that is very common in the North Sea.”

“What the deuce has the North Sea got to do with Sir Peter at this moment?”

“A good deal, since he is sailing on it.”

“Sailing on the North Sea? Sir Peter? Are you mad, child?”

Lady Baby shrugged her shoulders with apparent self-possession, but Agnes felt five small sharp nails making deep marks on her hand. Agnes did not wince—she knew that she was acting as safety-valve, but her heart thumped in dull apprehension.

“I suppose,” said Lady Baby, coldly, “that Sir Peter has got the right to take his yacht wherever he likes; he is a free British subject.”

“Murder!” said Nicky, “he isn’t.”

“Free?” echoed Lord Kippendale. “Is he not engaged to marry you within a month?”

“No,” said Lady Baby, “he is not; nor within a year either.”

“Let’s have no more of this beating about

the bush," retorted the old man, sternly. "Explain what you mean, Frances."

"I mean that our engagement is terminated."

"He has jilted you? The scoundrel has thrown you over?" The veins on Lord Kippendale's temples began to swell. •

"No, he has not thrown me over; it was I who—came to the decision."

Nicky emitted a sound which was something like an imperfectly suffocated roar, and sank down on the seat beside him.

"You! The jilting was on your side, was it? It was you who sent him to the Noarth Sea?" cried the Earl, bursting into his broadest accent, a certain sign of an impending storm. "And what in the name of the devil did ye do it for?"

"I don't know what you mean by jilting," said Lady Baby loftily, though she was beginning to lose her calmness of manner. "Having come to the conclusion that our temperaments were not likely to agree throughout life, I found it wiser to insist upon an immediate separation."

"*Tamperaments? Feeddlesticks!*" said Lord

Kippendale, hotly. "And these are the grounds on which you gave him his final dismissal? And he accepted it?"

"Yes; he saw the sense of it."

"Then that is gone too," said the old man, lifting his hands to his head—"that is gone too."

"But it isn't final! It can't be final!" shouted Nicky, springing to his feet; he looked pale and agitated. "Wyndhurst can't have accepted such an explanation as final; by Jove, he can't! Frances has only got to write to him—somebody ought to write at once—I'll make a shy at a letter if necessary; he must be brought back——"

"Brought back *now*?" said the Earl, stopping straight in front of his son-in-law, and for one minute growing haughty and cool; "begged to come back *now* that we are on the highroad to beggary? Entreated to overlook the trifling slight that has been put upon him, in consideration of our being so very much in need of his goodwill and assistance? My daughter has jilted him, and you seem about to suggest that

I should ask him for money? You must be raving, Craigtoun!"

"By Jove! I didn't mean to put it that way," stammered the bulky Nicky, instinctively backing before his short father-in-law, the crown of whose head was about on a level with his chin, but the lightning of whose eyes was more than he could bear.

"I don't care in what way you put it, but that's the gist and upshot of the matter; and brought about by what? By a parcel of the daftest whims that ever were invented to make mischief in this world." He turned again upon his daughter, still with those flashing eyes, but Lady Baby held her ground, though she was trembling. She did not back like Nicky; she even met her father's gaze, persevering all the time in her ill-treatment of Agnes's long-suffering hand. Lady Baby was the only one of the family who ever dared to brave the old Earl's fits of passion.

"It was no whim," she said, obstinately; "we agreed to part."

"Silence!" thundered her father, coming a

step nearer. "None of this schoolroom nonsense. Silence, I say! I will be obeyed,—have a care——"

"Father!" came from Agnes with a faint cry; for Lord Kippendale, with his clenched hand raised, looked almost ready to strike his daughter.

"Yes," he broke off, "you are right, Aggie—I am too hot;" his hand dropped to his side. He threw a glance around him, forlorn and hopeless. "Yes, you are right; it can do no good;—it is too late, the harm is done;—my daughter is a jilt, and I—I am a ruined man." His white head sank on his breast; he moved slowly to the door. They heard his steps along the passage.

For a minute there was silence in the library. Lady Baby had not moved by a hair's-breadth; her face was hard as stone. Then all at once Nicky burst out—

"You've got it now! I suppose you're pleased,—I suppose you like having your own way, my Lady Baby? You've got it now—you've got it, by Jingo and by Jove! Come away, Aggie."

Agnes gave him an appealing glance, her hand was still held as in a vice.

“You are pleased now, I hope,” said Nicky, bending down to glare into his sister-in-law’s expressionless face. His own features were absolutely distorted with excitement, and his habitual grin had turned into a caricature of itself. “I hope you are pleased, now that you have been the ruin of us all. Aggie, curse it, I say, come this moment !”

Agnes was on her feet already, having cautiously released her hand. Her heart was full of the most sisterly sympathy, but she followed her husband from the room with scarcely a backward glance. Presently she was bathing her bruised hand in cold water ; Nicky hated to see the smallest disfigurement about her person, and her milky-white skin now showed distinct marks of five small, sharp nails.

After the heavy door had closed, Lady Baby stood just as silently and stonily as before, staring in front of her at the book-shelves. She was not quite sure of her own identity. Was it

indeed she who had been spoken to thus?—*she*, the petted child of the house and its supreme mistress? And *was* she the ruin of them all? Could Sir Peter have saved them? Was that what they meant? Was that what Maud had hinted at the other day? As her father's fierce words to Nicky rang again in her ears, it seemed to her all at once that a new barrier had sprung up between Sir Peter and herself. It was that which she stared at, while her gaze seemed fixed on vacancy.

In another moment she had thrown herself down with her head in the cushions of the chair, and had burst into passionate tears. They were the first tears she had shed since Sir Peter had parted from her in the conservatory.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE PLEDGE.

"But whispering tongues can poison truth ;
And life is thorny and youth is vain."

THE discovery that Sir Peter was rich and that she was poor had come upon Lady Baby like a revelation. When she had spoken of the news of the trouble being certain to bring him back, she had not in her own mind defined the trouble as being simply pecuniary. Money was a very formless conception to her, for she had never been in want of it. She had merely argued that because something disagreeable had happened to them, Sir Peter was sure to return.

But this new view of the case was startling ; it filled her with a vague uneasiness. She brooded over it in private, without being able

to come to any definite conclusion on the subject. Then there came a day when she found herself unexpectedly led to a conclusion, judiciously helped, as it were, to put into distinct form the uneasy thoughts that had been puzzling her.

The manner in which this came about was as follows.

For some time past Lady Euphrosyne, on her side, had been puzzling herself with questions. Something which Maud had said during that first conversation between them had been fermenting ever since in Lady Euphrosyne's mind. This was the exclamation which had escaped Miss Epperton about there being other things in the world besides common-sense—for instance, pride—and the inference drawn therefrom as to the possibility of Sir Peter not being re-accepted when he returned to re-offer himself. If that exclamation had been the means of stirring Maud's own curiosity, how much more was it likely to stir that of Lady Euphrosyne, who had a distinct interest very much at stake, and very much involved in this question! This

curiosity had, with the lapse of days, gradually become devouring, and it was in the vague expectation of having it satisfied that her ladyship drove over one day to Kippendale. Fixed plan she had none in her mind. Her one idea was to find out, through Miss Epperton of course, as much as she could about the state of mind of Lady Baby and the rest of the family. Her hopes were exclusively fixed on Miss Epperton, so much so that when, having waited for ten minutes alone in the drawing-room, she found herself confronted by Lady Baby instead of Miss Epperton, her calculations were thrown all of a dismal heap, and every scrap of her presence of mind was required to cover her disappointment.

“I am afraid I have interrupted your stroll in the garden,” she said with a bitter-sweet smile, glancing the while over Lady Baby’s shoulder to see if her ally was not in sight. Lady Baby had come in through the conservatory door. Her garden-hat was in her hand, and her hair was pushed back from her forehead, for the day was very warm.

“I was coming in at any rate,” she said, advancing rather stiffly to meet Lady Euphrosyne.

“Thanks; I shall not keep you long. I only looked in for a few minutes to inquire how you are all keeping up, and to——”

“Say that you had heard the news?”

“The news?”

“Yes, the news of my engagement being broken off. It is the news of the day,” and she gave a hard little laugh.

“Yes,” said Lady Euphrosyne, on whom this came rather suddenly; “yes, certainly, I am aware of that. Well, to speak the honest truth, I think you have taken the wisest course.”

“Why?” asked Lady Baby, bridling on the instant.

“Why? Well, do you know, it struck me from the very first that you were eminently unsuited to one another.”

“I am glad that *somebody* at least agrees with me there,” said Lady Baby, with a scornful smile. “I think you are the first person, Lady Euphrosyne, who has acknowledged that I am wise.”

“The first person?” echoed her ladyship; “are your relations, then, not of your way of thinking in this matter? The *first* person—oh yes, to be sure, I see. It was scarcely to be expected that they should be much pleased, and at this moment, too, of all others.”

It had suddenly occurred to Lady Euphrosyne, that despite the non-appearance of her ally, she need not necessarily go back to Nolesworth with her curiosity unsatisfied. There was a much more direct way of gaining the assurance for which her spirit hungered, though delicacy, to be sure, demanded that the point be led up to in the most indirect manner possible. She did not at all know how this was to be done, though she immediately resolved to do it; and when Lady Baby asked sullenly, “Why at *this* moment of all others?” Lady Euphrosyne, abandoning herself to the tide of chance, could only respond rather at random—

“Oh, it was not that I meant; and besides so far as I understand, it really did not occur at the same moment at all. That is to say, I believe I am right in saying that the discovery

of your two characters not suiting each other was made previous to the melancholy news of the Gullyscoombe disaster, was it not?"

"Yes, it was," and the colour began very slowly to mount in Lady Baby's face. "What of that?"

"Nothing, nothing at all; except perhaps a rather unlucky, a rather unfortunate coincidence."

"But I thought you just said that I had been so wise——"

"In some senses, my dear; yes, certainly in *some* senses," said Lady Euphrosyne, leaning back in her chair. Her composure was returning in exact proportion as Lady Baby's was vanishing: she was now self-possessed enough to look thoroughly exhausted. Quite apart from her real *bond fide* curiosity, she was beginning to enjoy what she was about. For weeks past the intercourse between these two had been a continual case of mutual exasperation, in which Lady Baby had invariably held the advantage. To-day the cases were going to be reversed, and Lady Baby had only herself to thank if she

could hope for no mercy. She stood now bolt-upright in the middle of the room, twisting the long ribbon of her hat round each of her fingers in turn, while a shifting rose-coloured light, streaming through the closed curtains, daintily tinged her white dress into the semblance of a pink one, and playfully kindled her fair hair into the glow of a fiery auburn. The curtains had all been lowered to keep out the unusual heat of the sunshine ; and, in this pink gloom, the big drawing-room had something of a religious mystery. There was a faint smell of sandal-wood in the air, and the faint outlines of costly screens and couches in the background.

“I want to know,” said Lady Baby, coming a step nearer, “I want to understand what that means, being wiser in *some* senses,—in *what* senses, Lady Euphrosyne?”

“Dear me, child,” and Lady Euphrosyne toyed delicately with her lace parasol, for she was now quite herself again, “you need not pounce upon one’s words so! In worldly senses, I meant. One can’t help there being worldly people in the world, and one can’t

help their looking at things from a worldly point of view."

"Why need they look from any point of view at all at an affair which isn't any business of theirs?"

"One can't help that either, my dear; they will not only look, but they will think and they will speak."

"Really!" with an increase of scorn, "and what will they say?"

"For one thing, I shouldn't be surprised if they said it was a pity you did not put off your discovery for a week longer."

"Which discovery?"

"The discovery about you and Peter not suiting each other."

"What good would the putting it off have done?"

"It might have done this good, that possibly—mind I only say *possibly*—you might not have thought it worth while to make the discovery at all."

"Do you know what made me make that discovery, Lady Euphrosyne?"

“The incompatibility of your dispositions, was it not?”

“Yes; and do you, or do the worldly people you speak of, suppose that our dispositions would have become more compatible in a single week?”

“Not in *any* single week, perhaps, but——”

“But in this particular week?”

Lady Euphrosyne looked aside, smiling undecidedly. This impetuous taking up of her words was hurrying her into a far broader statement of the case than she had originally contemplated.

“Because in this particular week we lost all our money?” finished Lady Baby, beginning to pant a little.

Lady Euphrosyne raised her hands with her favourite gesture of deprecation. She was protesting against the coarseness of the assertion. “*Par pitié!* People don’t lose all their money in a week, — at least not the right sort of people, not people that one *knows*. You talk as if your father was an economical navvy who kept his earnings in a stocking or a

flower-pot, and who is reduced to starvation by a fellow-navvy walking off with the flower-pot. Of course, he may have had serious losses, he may even be——”

“Ruined? I suppose the right sort of people can be ruined, can't they? Well, what earthly connection can there be between our being ruined and the resolution that I came to?” In her innermost heart Lady Baby contemplated that “resolution” rather differently now; but Lady Euphrosyne's attitude had driven her back to the defence of her half-abandoned guns. “Don't you see that the two facts are quite distinct and separate? Don't you see that, Lady Euphrosyne?”

“I see that they are so in your mind, my dear child, just now,—but that is no reason why they should remain so very distinct. We would need to see this great resolution put to the test first, you know,” and she laughed uneasily.

“To the test! What test? When is it to be put to the test?”

“When Peter comes back.”

“When he comes back!” said Lady Baby, catching her breath. “*Will* he come back?”

“Of course he will come back,” said Lady Euphrosyne, watching the girl very keenly through her narrowed eyelids. “Even if he agreed with you ever so much in finding your two characters unsuited to one another, he will consider it his duty to come back, as affairs now stand. No man of honour would be willing to risk the imputation of having acted in a mercenary spirit,—for, of course, the world will never clearly disentangle the chronological order of two events that happened in such close succession.”

“No, I suppose they will not,” said Lady Baby, very slowly; “I am beginning to understand. Go on, please, Lady Euphrosyne—I want to hear a little more. You have told me what you believe Peter is going to do, and now I should like to hear what you believe I am going to do.”

“How can I tell you that, child,” and Lady Euphrosyne languidly rose to leave, “when it is more than likely that you could not tell it

yourself? But when I get the news—if I get the news—of your having made it up with him, I shall not pretend to be overwhelmed with surprise, and I am not sure, either, whether I shall not think that you have done the wisest thing after all.”

“Even though we are so extremely ill suited to one another, as you said a minute ago?”

“You are young enough to learn how to conform your temper to that of your husband,” said Lady Euphrosyne, in her tone of serenest patronage, and speaking at that moment with no deeper object than that of increasing the irritation which she was pleased to see she had produced. “There is no reason, after all, why this marriage should not turn out as well as many others. But, mind, I do not dabble in prophecy; all I venture to predict is that you will not be quite so inexorable as you would have me suppose. And now, really I cannot keep the horses standing any longer.”

Lady Euphrosyne’s curiosity was indeed

bonâ fide, but so was her terror of doing anything that might be in doubtful taste. By the look of alarmed perplexity on her victim's face she recognised that the torture had been pushed to the utmost limit that the canons of polite society could be expected to tolerate; that she had dealt the straightest blow and given the deepest stab that etiquette could by any possibility be persuaded to sanction. One line straighter, one shade deeper, would infallibly have vulgarised the whole transaction; and it was just because she caught a glimpse of this horrible danger impending, that Lady Euphrosyne thought it safer to cut her visit short. Something too there may have been about Lady Baby's expression which made her ladyship wish rather fervently that she were well out of that rose-coloured drawing-room, even with her curiosity in this half-satisfied state. After all, it would have been a great deal pleasanter if she could have got the information she wanted in a quiet way from Miss Epperton. Lady Baby was not an agreeable victim to experiment upon. With

her gleaming blue eyes widely dilated, she looked just now somewhat like an animal at bay. Her chest was heaving and her fingers trembled as they twirled the ribbon. To Lady Euphrosyne's farewell words she made no answer; to the hand put out towards her she did not respond. She neither rang for the servant nor went to the door to see her visitor off,—in point of fact, she did not seem distinctly aware that Lady Euphrosyne was going until she heard the wheels grinding on the gravel. She raised her head then, as though waking from a dream. "Not so inexorable as you would have me believe," she repeated aloud; "that means—let me see, what does it mean exactly?" and she put her hands to her head. After a minute she burst into an almost triumphant laugh. She had got at the sense of it, she knew what it all meant now: it lay before her, clear as a map. Peter was going to come back; not because he cared for her, but because he would consider himself bound to sacrifice his own inclination, or disinclination, to what the world might say of

his conduct : he would then offer her his pity, his compassion, his—yes—his *charity*, thinly disguised under the name of his love. And this gift it was which Lady Euphrosyne believed that she, Lady Baby, was thankfully going to accept? O heavens! why had she been so stupid as not to have understood it all long ago? Why had she stood in that dazed bewilderment instead of promptly flinging back the ignominious charge in the most vigorous and unmistakable words afforded by the English language—if indeed the English language possessed any words vigorous enough for the occasion : at this moment she doubted it. Why had she not made a protestation? Why had she not sworn an oath? Was it too late to do so yet? She ran to the window to see if the carriage were yet within reach ; alas ! no—scarcely even within sight, a mere speck in the distance. And in that speck sat Lady Euphrosyne, rolling towards Nolesworth, and firmly convinced all the time that she had just parted from the future recipient of her step-son's generously bestowed—alms ; the

poor beggar-maid who, for the sake of those alms, was to conform her character to that of the alms-giver. *Conform*, indeed! But this must not continue; Lady Euphrosyne must be cured of her misapprehension with the least possible delay. The only question was, how? And Lady Baby glanced wildly around her, as though in search of some instant remedy for her wounded pride. Unless some step were taken to clear her character of this hideous imputation, she felt that she could not sleep that night. Sleep! Why, she could scarcely breathe. The recollection of Lady Euphrosyne's words and of her looks, now seen in their right light, produced an exasperation so acute as to be almost like physical pain: it stung like a lash, it choked her as though it had been a real tangible weight.

A note to be despatched immediately to Nolesworth was the only course that suggested itself, and scarcely had it suggested itself when Lady Baby flew at the writing-table like a tigress at her prey. The pen was

dipped in the ink with an expression that would have befitted the loading of a pistol, and the Nolesworth carriage was not well off Kippendale ground before four pages of note-paper had been covered, partly with blots and partly with vehement denials and assurances as vehement. "I understand you now," it began point-blank. "I don't know why I did not understand you at once; but you are *quite* wrong." Then there followed a good deal, more or less grammatically expressed, about finding it infinitely preferable to live on bread-crusts and ditch-water for never mind how many years to come, than to marry a man who would only come back to her out of a sense of duty. The conduct of any woman who could be capable of so basely accepting his sacrifice was characterised as contemptible, ignominious, grovelling, and by a few other adjectives, the most powerful which she could collect upon so short a notice. "I solemnly assure you," she concluded, "that so long as Peter is rich and I am poor, nothing, nothing, *nothing* will

ever induce me to be his wife. You *must* believe me now; I am ready to swear it if you wish."

It was with fingers still shaking with excitement, with quivering nerves and throbbing temples, that Lady Baby scrawled the lines. As she sat at the writing-table, all alone in the big room, with its far-off corners drowned in rose-coloured gloom, and the faint smell of sandal-wood in the air, the atmosphere about her seemed to thrill with a strange solemnity. The red light played over the table, and poured down on the page of note-paper on which she was penning her impetuous declaration. If she had renounced her claim to Peter on a blood-stained parchment and signed it with her heart's own gore, the document could scarcely have looked redder or more threatening or more mystic than it looked to her eyes at this moment, and to her memory ever after.

When the curious note reached Lady Euphrosyne she was almost a little frightened. This stupendous result to her chance experi-

ment rather took her breath away. It is not the first time that a shot fired off at random has brought down the right bird, or that a bait dropped anyhow into a pool has hooked the right fish. But Lady Euphrosyne did not reflect in this fashion; she thought she must have been manœuvring very deeply in order to have brought about this end, and she felt a distinct increase of awe towards herself.

This feeling, however, did not interfere with the scrupulous care with which she locked away the wild little note in the innermost recess of her desk.

CHAPTER XXII.

AMBER SILK.

“Love in a hut, with water and a crust,
Is—Love, forgive us!—cinders, ashes, dust.”

ONE summer evening, about this time, Maud Epperton took an amber-silk dinner-dress out of the press, contemplated it thoughtfully, shook her head, put the dress back again, hesitated a little, and ended by taking it out again and laying it on the bed. It was a very handsome dress, one which she never would have possessed had not the young Marchioness of Carringsford, who had taken a fancy to her for a few weeks last season, discovered that amber did not suit her own complexion, and, with a sort of friendly impertinence, offered the cast-off garment to

Maud. "It isn't much soiled," she explained; "the bottom flounce is rather shabby, but I daresay you are not so particular as I am." Maud would have been as particular as anybody had she had any fortune but her face; but amber *did* suit her complexion; and she could not afford to take offence. She knew that by sitting up for two hours any night she could easily contrive to make the dress look as good as new.

It was just because amber suited her complexion so well that Maud had hesitated about appearing in that colour to-night. She knew that she was in want of very careful dressing-up if she was to look anything like her best; but she also knew that there were certain prudential considerations which might make it advisable to avoid looking her best.

"But, after all, one can't be prudent for ever," said Maud, as she took up the little pot marked "*fleur de rose*," and began laying a delicate coat of pink on her cheeks. "There is no reason why he should think me a fright." In the midst of the operation she suddenly sprang

up and threw the cotton-dab to the other end of the room.

“Sham! all sham!” she muttered. Something that Germaine had said in the course of their last conversation had flashed into her mind: “Then there are the people who don’t tell lies at all. I know you are one of them.”

She stood for a moment with her hands tightly clenched, then threw a glance into the glass, then quietly crossed the room, and picking up the dab, continued the operation just as before. What could it matter what Germaine said, since, after the events of the last few days, she had told herself at last that she must give him up!

The conclusion had not been reached without struggles; ay, and fierce ones. Why, oh why, was fate so perverse? Why need she have fixed her hopes on a man whose prosperity could receive so great a shock from a blunder about a few inches of rock? That is what it came to. “And I thought mines were such safe things!” said Maud, despondently shaking her head. “If I had not thought that, I never would have troubled myself about those library-shelves or

that catalogue. So far as that goes," and she smiled cynically, "the original business that brought me north was a considerably less risky affair. A gale of wind might make the park at Nolesworth look rather bare, but it would scarcely throw Sir Peter's prosperity into the balance."

Maud heaved a sigh. There may have been in that sigh a little passing and surely pardonable regret at the thought of that enterprise abandoned under rather mortifying circumstances and against her will; but it is certain that that same sigh expressed a much more poignant regret for another enterprise, which, under very different circumstances and of her entire free will, she was now about to abandon. What she felt for her boyish lover did not precisely answer to the description of love; it was more a keen gratitude for his affection, a shamed emotion at being held so far above her value, a stirring-up of all the remains of the really good qualities which had once been in her nature. To be esteemed and adored by him would have been very precious to her—might, in fact, have been her saving; but the price which she was

asked to pay for this esteem was greater than her nature could afford.

It was some weeks now since the catastrophe; and Maud, thanks to being present at gloomy conversations and consulting works upon engineering, knew almost as much about the matter as Mr Reid himself. She had learned a great deal about the species of search now proceeding at Gullyscoombe, on the result of which the welfare or ill-fare of the house of Kippendale depended. She had found out that the expenses were enormous, the difficulties innumerable, and the results to be looked for absolutely problematical.

A very disagreeable word had been mentioned, the word *economy*; a word so very suggestive of warmed-up meat and last year's bonnets and hackney-carriages. Maud shuddered at the sound, as at the voice of a too familiar acquaintance. It was then that she began seriously to count the cost of Germaine's love; it was then also that she measured her capabilities of sacrifice, and found that they fell short of the standard required. Despise

her, you who have lived in comfort all your days! Throw at her the biggest stones that you have strength to pick up and agility to fling, all you easy-going, un-vexed, well-lodged, well-fed ones of the earth, who have never had to take thought of where the next meal is to come from! Very many people think themselves poor because they feel that they could enjoy a stall at the play a great deal oftener than they can afford it, or because they are forced to buy their books second-hand, or to patronise a second-rate dress-maker. Many others think they know all about poverty because they have been inside the houses of the poor,—and this, by the by, would be about as true as saying that you know exactly what it is to be drowned because you have stood by and seen some one else drowning.

But the poverty which Maud knew was not an imitation article: it was the real thing, with no nonsense about it, and her acquaintance with it was of the most personal and intimate. One wolf may be very like another; but it is one thing to see a wolf scratching at your neigh-

bour's door, and it is quite another thing to see him walking in at your own and making himself quite comfortable on the hearthstone, and grinning at you from beside the empty grate. Maud knew both cold and hunger, and this is not meant as a figure of speech. She had really been faint from the simple want of sufficient food, or of means to buy it,—she had really been cold from the simple want of adequate clothing; not once, but several times in her life, she had been forced to go to bed because there were no coals in the house, and to put her two shawls over her—yes, and the hearth-rug on the top of them, because her blankets were so thin and so few. It was a poverty which, by courtesy, might perhaps be described as genteel, but which, nevertheless, could sting and could bite and could pinch with the best of sharp-toothed, long-clawed monsters; and those that have been so stung and bitten and pinched do not easily recover from their fright. Maud still bore the scars of those bites upon her, and she feared another encounter with the monster as a burnt child fears the fire.

Considering that she had made up her mind to give up Germaine, it certainly was a weakness on Maud's part to put on that amber silk. She began to repent of her folly before she had done eating her soup; and when dessert was reached and she felt his admiring gaze still upon her, she told herself that the hour of the final explanation could now not be long delayed.

It came that very evening. Of course it had to happen some time or other; the game at hide-and-seek could not go on for ever. Maud could not always be having headaches and asking for her tea to be sent to her room, nor could she always be watching round corners and behind doors in order to escape Germaine. It may be that to-night she had desperately resigned herself to her fate, or it may be that the amber silk had made Germaine a shade more determined than usual; whatever it was, he managed to surprise her alone in one of the drawing-rooms after dinner.

He plunged at once into his declaration; he had been too long on the watch to be slow at

taking this chance. He told her that he adored her, and he laid his heart and his life at her feet.

Maud was more taken aback than she could have supposed possible. For a minute or two she lost her head and they stood staring at one another—he looking so resolute, and she looking so disconcerted, that any one would have supposed all the cleverness to have been on his side and all the simplicity on hers. Then she began to recover.

“It can’t be, Lord Germaine,” she said quickly, “it cannot be now,—it would not do at present,—your father would never allow it.”

“I am of age,” said Germaine; “and, besides, why should my father not allow it?”

“Under the circumstances I am sure that he would protest; and, of course, you would owe deference to his wishes.”

“Under which circumstances?” asked Germaine.

“Dear Lord Germaine, these unfortunate circumstances connected with Gullyscoombe, of course.” (“Nothing but plain speaking will do it,” she said to herself.)

“But Gullyscoombe may come right any day.”

“But also it may not.”

“Well, then, let us agree to wait. I could wait a century if I had your promise,” and he tried to take her hand.

She put it behind her back, smiling a little nervously. To pledge herself to this uncertain waiting was the very thing she wished to avoid. Had she been five years younger, she might have yielded, but she knew that her time was too short for any tricks of this sort.

“I can’t do it, Lord Germaine; it would be unfair to you. You will have other duties now; don’t you know what will be expected of you?”

“What?”

“To retrieve the family fortunes by a brilliant marriage, of course.”

“Nothing could be more brilliant than a marriage with you,” said Germaine, simply.

Maud sighed in despair; this simplicity was terrible.

“But don’t you see,” she said, trying hard to lose her temper, “that is not what I mean. You

will be expected to marry somebody with a much better position than I have, and with a great deal more money."

Germaine flushed violently. "You have no right," he exclaimed in sudden anger, and with a stamp that was something like one of Lady Baby's petulant stamps, magnified fourfold,— "no one has any right to dispose of me in that way against my will, or to take for granted that I would marry anybody for the sake of money! It is you whom I want to marry—only you alone, Miss Epperton," and he clasped his hands; "will you not give me your answer?"

"Give him your answer," a small voice cried within Maud's heart—"give him your answer, and his *congé* along with it, and say good-bye to him for evermore."

This was just what she wished to do; but face to face with him, she discovered that she could not. So Maud gave an answer, but it was evasive and temporising; it meant nothing, and it committed her to nothing. Germaine listened with an air of extreme perplexity,

and at the end he shook his head, and looked very big and very obstinate.

“No, I don’t see it,” he said.

“One of us two must try and be wise,” said Maud; “and since you will not have the wisdom on your side, it must be on mine. To consent to an engagement would be like hampering you with a burden.”

“No, it wouldn’t,” said Germaine, brightening. “I have thought of all that. Oh, I am not quite so foolish as you think me. Even if the copper is never found, we won’t have to starve exactly, though, of course, Reid says that we will have to give up a lot of things—horses and so on,”—he heaved a tremendous sigh,—“and, of course, I shall have to look out for something to do; but there will be no difficulty about that. I know lots of people; there’s a friend of mine in the wine trade, and another in a big City house. I daresay they could get me in, though, of course, I should like the army best. I don’t mind working; and oh, Miss Epperton, dearest, most beautiful Maud! I should be so proud to work

for you! I am game for anything, and I am very strong; I would break stones on the road if it would make you more comfortable. Only," he added, with a momentary touch of despondency, "I suppose I should always break them the wrong sizes."

Maud turned away; she was at her wits' end. How was she to tell him that, though he might be ready to become a stone-breaker for her sake, she was not at all ready to become a stone-breaker's wife; no, nor the wife of a wine merchant's clerk, or of a poor lieutenant? How was she to make him understand that, though these boasts were very brave, they were also very foolish? This boy knew not even the A B C of that dismal tale of pauperism which Maud had conned and conned until she knew it too well. Had not the lesson been learnt with pinched lips and chattering teeth, and by the light of the most inferior quality of tallow-candles?

"It cannot be," she murmured; "it cannot be now."

"Why not now, Maud?" he pleaded.

It thrilled her strangely to hear her name thus spoken by him, and yet she gladly seized on the pretext for anger. "It seems to me that you assume a great deal," she said, steadying herself to look straight into his blazing eyes, "it seems to me that you are very confident, Lord Germaine. What right have you to address me thus? What right have you to suppose that I return your sentiments?"

"No right at all," answered Germaine, without any hesitation, "except what you have given me."

"And what is that?" Maud felt an uneasy surprise; she had expected him to plunge headlong into an ocean of humble protestations. His next words surprised her still more.

"I know quite well that I am not near good enough for you," he began, with almost as much confidence as humility; "but then, you see, I don't think any man in the world is that; and since some man must win you, why should not I as well as any other? It took me a very long time, I assure you, before I could trust myself to believe that, in spite of my being so clumsy

and so ignorant, you really were good enough to care for me a little."

"Lord Germaine!" cried Maud, turning rather pale as she faced him.

"Are you angry? I suppose I am putting it awkwardly."

"How do you know?—what has made you think that I—care for you?"

"What has made me think it?" repeated Germaine slowly, though he did not look a bit disconcerted. "Why, dozens and dozens of things. All the times that you have allowed me to help you, and all the walks you have allowed me to take with you, and all the things you have allowed me to say; and—and the way in which you have sometimes looked at me," added Germaine, with one of his deepest school-girl blushes and his most resolute giant-manner. "You would never have allowed me to be with you so much if you had not cared for me a little; because, don't you see, that would have been giving me false hopes," he said earnestly, "and to give me false hopes would have been cruel."

“But how could I guess that you had any hopes?” cried Maud, in despair.

He shook his head with a broad smile of confidence. “You are a great deal too clever not to have guessed that.”

“And supposing I tell you now that your hopes were groundless all along.”

“You will not tell me that, because it would be the same as telling me that you have made a fool of me all along.”

“And supposing I have made a fool of you?” she said, recklessly.

“You are a great deal too good to have done that.”

Maud wrung her hands till they ached. “This faith, this terrible faith!” she muttered to herself.

“Have you never heard of men being made fools of by women, Lord Germaine?”

“Oh yes, I have,” said Germaine, promptly; “but it is the wicked women that do that, not the good ones. There was Adam’s wife, for instance, the fisher-girl: we talked about her the other day.”

“Lord Germaine,” said Maud, suddenly, “I am as bad as that fisher-girl. I am not to be trusted, believe me.” And then she laughed aloud. “Of course you can’t believe me if I am not to be trusted; but what I want you to understand is, that it was a mistake, I mean when you think that I——when you took my friendship for anything warmer——”

Germaine looked startled, but he stood his ground. “No, no, no, I am not mistaken. It can’t be—it was all too clear; you cannot have been playing with me. Swear it!” he cried suddenly; “swear that it was all a comedy, and that I am nothing to you!”

Maud tried to meet his eyes and failed; tried to open her lips and failed again. All her will was bent upon saying the words, and yet they would not be spoken.

“Swear it!” said Germaine again. “Swear it!” and he took her hands.

Then her white eyelids were slowly raised, with that exquisite languor, that slowly dawning brilliancy of the eye beneath, that had driven so many ineligible suitors half out of

their senses. Maud was not thinking of the eyelash trick then, but she had never accomplished it more effectually. For a few seconds' space they looked at each other full, and there was hunger and yearning, not only on his face but also on hers, and the difference only was that to her yearning there was a measure and to his there was none. She had not gazed for half a minute when she saw the danger, saw the abyss at her feet, into which his breathless ardour had all but carried her, sweeping her off the firm ground of worldly wisdom. Let her hands rest but one minute longer in his, and she knew that their lips also would have met; let this dangerous pause endure for one second more, and the only words then fit to end it would be words of tenderest import, oaths which it would be so hard to break, yet so expedient.

It was for fear of being the first to speak those words that, with a faint cry, Maud wrenched away her hands—and hiding her face, flew from the room. She paused only when she was in the harbour of her own apartment,

to which she had flown so often lately. So the dreaded end had come at last! Ah, that unlucky amber silk!

“I shall have to go away,” she said; and she began feverishly to collect the trifles on the table, as though for instant departure. She felt that after to-day her tactics of evasion were played out. After to-day she could not fail to mistrust herself very gravely. If she stayed here longer, one of two things would happen; either she would tell Germaine that she loved him, or she would tell him that she did not love him. To do the first would be to abandon herself voluntarily, and with her eyes wide open, to the claws of that familiar wolf which she had with such varying success been artfully dodging all her life; to do the second would be to brand herself in his eyes as the heartless coquette of whom he had so slightingly spoken. She dreaded this with a dread that was to herself almost incredible. He should be thrown over, yes — but thrown over so gently as not to disarrange one petal of that beautiful flower of love which grew in his heart.

A man of more experience would have simplified the matter by retiring voluntarily for the present, with some graceful phrase upon his lips about renouncing the woman he loved rather than asking her to share his ruined fortunes. That is what a man of common-sense and common honour would have done ; but Germaine was not a man of common-sense, and his honour was of so uncommon and quixotical a type, that if any one had suggested to him the possibility of Miss Epperton finding him more acceptable with his money than without it, he would certainly have called the remark sacrilegious, and the person who made it a blasphemer. She was to him too much of a goddess to be judged of by the ordinary standards of humanity. His attitude to-day had altogether rather surprised Maud, and it had infinitely complicated the position. There was nothing for it but flight, and this time she could not afford to be very nice in her choice of a refuge ; there was only Brackton.

Nolesworth, indeed, might have been open to her, for the general invitation which Maud had

already manœuvred out of Lady Euphrosyne might easily have been shaped into a particular one, but Nolesworth was not far enough off. Aunt Sophy, besides, would be a better card to play at this moment than Lady Euphrosyne. An aunt, particularly at so safe a distance, might very easily be supposed to require her niece's presence, and there were surely pretexts enough for making the summons sudden and peremptory, and thus saving the abruptly departing niece from all danger of being confounded with those proverbial rats that are so prone to scuttle out of sinking ships.

Maud packed her boxes that night, quite determined to leave next day, yet only half determined, or rather continually altering her determination, as to what her pretext of departure should be. It was just possible that she might not have to go beyond ingenious evasion and some vague statements about a letter received; but of course much depended on the circumstances of the moment, and to that she finally decided to trust.

When next morning came, her hopes as to

vague statements being sufficient were very speedily baffled. The interest and sympathy of her hosts was a great deal too earnest to be satisfied with anything so indefinite. Her aunt wanted her? She really must go that very day? What did her aunt want her for? They hoped she had had no bad news? Was it possible that her aunt was ill?

“Yes, she is ill—that is to say, she is not very well,” said Maud, gulping down a mouthful of tea. She was in a corner, and there was no help for it. Germaine’s distressed gaze was upon her; oh, how she wished at that moment that it could have been done without a fib! But it couldn’t. In order that he should think her quite sincere, it was necessary to tell just one more lie. The lie once spoken, Maud still clung to the hope that at least her invention would not be taxed in elaborating her first general statement; but here she had reckoned without Germaine, who always liked a literal account of things, and whose deep concern for her suffering relative became, as breakfast advanced, almost oppressive. He wanted to know what she

was suffering from ; and when Maud said something evasive about attacks to which her aunt was occasionally subject, he was not satisfied yet. "There are so many different sorts of attacks," he persisted.

"These are nervous attacks," said Maud, hurriedly. It happened to be true that on the occasion of some furniture being seized for debt, Aunt Sophy had had an attack of the nerves. "He will drive me to detail all the symptoms presently, at the thorough-going rate he does things," added Maud to herself. It was in vain that she attempted to turn the conversation. Germaine pressed for more information ; he wanted to know whether the best advice had been procured for her aunt ? Whether Miss Epperton would have to sit up at night ? How long the last attack had lasted ? Whether she would not find it advisable to take her aunt somewhere for change of air ? He remembered that when his sister Catherine had had a nervous attack after poor George's death, she had not rallied until she had been moved to Brighton ; and he also remembered that she had lived on

nothing but champagne and hothouse grapes for weeks. He hoped Miss Epperton would give her aunt plenty of champagne and hothouse grapes.

“I think that will have to be dispensed with,” said Maud, gravely. “My poor old aunt’s income would not go far towards champagne or baskets of grapes.” It was not without motive that Maud put in this side-shot. The impression she wanted to leave behind her was to be one of as great unselfishness as possible, and this could best be done by placing her poor old aunt in the light of an unattractive pauper.

But even the cleverest of all clever combinations sometimes fails ; and how could Maud, with all her ingenuity, know that one single little remark dropped about hothouse grapes was going to lead to such serious ultimate results ?

CHAPTER XXIII.

A BASKET OF GRAPES.

“How many tales to please me hath she coined,
Dreading my love, the loss thereof still fearing !”

From the Lady FRANCES BEVAN to Miss EPPERTON, care of the
Lady Euphrosyne Wyndhurst, Grosvenor Crescent, London, W.

“DEAREST MAUD,—We have at last made up our minds. It is rather terrible to be sure, but I think that even a terrible thing is more bearable than dangling on as we have been doing for the last two months. Maud, we are going to leave Kippendale, and we are going to emigrate to—no, you will never guess if you try till to-morrow, so I had better plump it out at once—we are going to emigrate to Gullyscoombe ! It was Mr Reid who first started the idea, not about going to Gullyscoombe, but about leaving

Kippendale. I think he has been working up to it for a long time past. First he insisted upon one footman being discharged, and then the other; then he pounced upon the stables, and very nearly cleared them out,—oh, Maud, and the kennels are empty too!—those were terrible days! And after that he began to talk about gardeners being so expensive, and about its being an extravagance to have hothouses; and at last papa lost patience, and asked him whether he did not think it an extravagance to have a roof over one's head at all? and Mr Reid looked very grave, and answered that such a roof as Kippendale was undoubtedly more than we should be able to afford for very long, more especially if papa would insist on forgetting that charity begins at home. Of course he meant that last £50 which papa had sent to the poor foreman with the fifteen children. I wish you could have seen Mr Reid when he found this out. I didn't think anybody ever could be so red in the face without exploding; and as for his hair, I thought it would fly straight off his head like

dandelion fluff. Well, on the day I am telling you of, papa came home looking quite perplexed, and he called us all together, and we had a discussion. We very soon came to the conclusion that we had better go away somewhere, just for a time, you know, until the copper is found,—for, of course, we all *firmly* believe in Swan's copper, and I hope you do too. The worst is that the looking for it costs such a lot of money. I never knew that engineers were such expensive things until Mr Reid told me so. Mr Reid is a very provoking person to talk to. That same day, when he was telling me about the engineers, he laughed in the most unpleasant manner, and only because I suggested to him that surely it would be much cheaper, instead of paying engineer's bills, to look for the copper with the divining-rod. 'Hazel and thorn-bushes grow everywhere,' I said, 'and all one would require would be a pen-knife'—'And the *virtue*,' he finished, with a horribly sarcastic smile. I am afraid he doesn't think much of the divining-rod; but I have read

up all about it, and I believe in it almost as firmly as I do in Swan's copper. But I am getting off the history of that evening. After we had settled that we must go, the next question was where to go to; and we all had different ideas. I suggested Normandy or Brittany, for that is where people in novels always go to when they are ruined; but papa said he had forgotten all his French, and was not going to begin over again. Nicky suggested London lodgings, but at that we all struck. Germaine suggested nothing at all,—I don't know what has happened to Germaine, he doesn't seem to care what is going on,—but we others went on arguing and discussing. We were quite agreed that wherever we went to, it must be to a smaller house, and to live on a smaller scale, so that we should be able to spend every spare penny on the copper-hunt; but somehow we didn't seem to be getting much beyond this point, when suddenly I had an idea. This time, I daresay, you will guess what the idea was—it was the divining-rod. You know that I had been

thinking of the divining-rod a good deal lately, and wondering how we could hit upon somebody who had the power; and now it all at once occurred to me that there really was no reason at all why that person should not be one of ourselves; nobody can tell until they have tried, and fancy what an ideal end to all our troubles it would be if Agnes or Kate or I were to strike the hidden vein! It would be almost as good as the third volume of a novel.

“My proposal was at first received with consternation, then with jeers; but when they had done jeering they began to argue. One by one they came over to my side. Kate was the first who knocked under,—I think she rather enjoys the idea of the melancholy rocks and the waves and the sea-gulls; then Nicky got the length of acknowledging that Gullyscoombe was the only place for which we should not have to pay rent; then it suddenly occurred to papa that if he were down there he would have a much better chance of bullying the engineers. The argument lasted till deep

into the night, but the long and the short of it is that we are going to Gullyscoombe. It seems that the house there is in quite a decent state of repair, and big enough to hold us, even without turning out Captain John's widow and family. In fact, so many advantages have been discovered about the plan, that I am afraid they all have lost sight of the original idea of the thing; but I have not. In my eyes it is still the divining-rod which is acting finger of Providence; and having once pointed out Gullyscoombe, surely it will not be so shabby as to stop short there!

“Good-bye, dearest Maud. It is not likely that we shall be here much longer, for we want to get settled before winter.”

This letter bore a date early in September, and by it it will be seen that though Lord Kippendale and his family had struggled hard against the acknowledgment of their actual ruin, yet when they gave in they gave in thoroughly, and had begun, in a rather headlong fashion, to fit themselves to their new

position. Economy has a great many different forms, and can be practised on a great many different scales. A sultan economises by reducing his four hundred wives to two hundred ; a London lady economises by giving up her carriage ; and a curate's wife does so by scrimping the lard in the frying or the flounces on her gown.

Lady Baby, like others, had her own way, but it was of doubtful efficacy. The first thing she did, in the days when Mr Reid began to talk of economy, was to give away all the silk dresses which hung in her wardrobe. It was to the housemaids and kitchen-maids that she gave them, most of whom were on the point of departure, and who accepted the gifts with amazed gratitude. What use a pale pink satin dinner-dress would be to Jemima, the scullery-maid, might be an open question ; but Lady Baby only sat down to reflect when her wardrobe was empty, and though it then occurred to her that she had parted with the last silk dresses that she was likely to possess for a good long time, yet she consoled herself

with a conviction that she was in a general sort of way adapting herself to her new circumstances. The next step was to make up her mind that the household accounts must in future be strictly kept. Consequently she wrote to Howell & James, giving them *carte blanche* to send her a "good, stout, serviceable, leather-bound account-book." Leather, of course, was more durable than linen; and Russia leather, she had always heard, was the best sort of leather, therefore the book was ordered of Russia. Being in a great hurry to commence her new economies, the order was sent telegraphically; and as it was impossible to give the details in a single message, the telegram had to be doubled. Howell & James telegraphed back (at her expense) that a book of that description was not in stock, but had been instantly ordered and intrusted to the most skilful workmen. The exquisite volume arrived in time, very exquisite and tremendously expensive; but then it was the first step towards economy. Lady Baby spent several hours every day over it, at least she

did so at first; but it must be confessed that after a week the entries ran something as follows:—

Lucifer matches	£0	4	6½
Washing-soda	0	0	9½
Lost account of	11	0	0

All the same, the Russia leather book was a great help in those days; for Lady Baby had accepted her position with a sort of grim fervour that was almost enthusiasm. If she was to be penniless, she would be so ostentatiously; she did not mean to hang her head about that or about anything else. She was going to be very brave.

And courage was needed in those days, and was needed every day more as the slow time crept on and no good news came from Gullyscoombe. It was Mr Reid on whom this strain of incertitude seemed to tell the most heavily. He had long ago come to the conclusion that Lord Kippendale was by far the most maddening client that ever an unhappy man of business was afflicted with. It was not only his attitude towards the Gullyscoombe miners which

Mr Reid objected to, it was his attitude towards the engineers as well. Three or four of them had been turned off in succession ; for Lord Kippendale, convinced that nothing but blundering and ignorance were at the bottom of this long delay, was a great deal too impatient to get on to the next thing, which in this case happened to be the next engineer, to pay any heed to Mr Reid's most strenuous protestations. The baffled engineers retired chafing, and presently sent in bills, the length of which might have led one to suppose that they were intended as healing plasters for wounded feelings. In this way, therefore, it was contrived that a search, which in itself was very expensive, was rendered about four times as expensive as was strictly necessary ; and it was after this had gone on for a little time that Mr Reid spoke out plainly and told Lord Kippendale that he would not be able to afford to dig very many more holes in the ground to stuff his money into. He also said various other things, which resulted in the resolution announced to Miss Epperton in Lady Baby's letter.

What Lady Baby said about Germaine having shown no interest in this discussion was true enough. A good deal had happened to Germaine within the last six weeks, brief though the narrative of the following events may appear.

It was a couple of days after Miss Epperton's departure that Germaine, turning away from the door of Mr Reid's office, whither he had accompanied his father, happened to find himself straight opposite a fruiterer's shop. He stood still on the instant, fascinated by the sight of a pile of hothouse grapes, the first he had seen that year, for the Kippendale grapes were not quite ripe. Hothouse grapes had been in his thoughts more than once during the last days. The pictures which had haunted him of his goddess smoothing pillows and stirring medicines had occasionally been mixed up with visions of the hothouse grapes and the champagne which Miss Epperton's aunt was not able to afford, but which he was quite sure she would require after her nervous attack. He did not quite see his way to presenting Miss Epperton's

aunt with a dozen of Cliquot; but no one would scruple to accept a basket of hothouse fruit.

Evidently it was Providence which had thrown these grapes on his path, and that very same evening the basket went off, accompanied by a short note, and addressed to Miss Epperton, 93 Smithy Street, Brackton.

A few days later he received the following reply :—

“93 SMITHY STREET, BRACKTON.

“Miss Sophia Epperton presents her compliments to Lord Germaine. The grapes are being returned to him to-night by rail. It is all a mistake; she has not been ill, and if she had, grapes would probably have made her worse, as fresh fruit of any sort disagrees with her. Miss Sophia Epperton begs to state that it is not her fault if she read the letter; people who address themselves to her niece should be careful to distinguish between the junior and the senior Miss Epperton, otherwise it is their own look-out. Miss Sophia Epperton has put Lord Germaine's letter into the fire, as the importance of its contents did not seem to warrant

the expenditure of a penny stamp. The younger Miss Epperton, having unexpectedly favoured this poor roof for two nights, has now gone to London to rejoin her new patroness, Lady Euphrosyne — Something ; but Miss Epperton senior has to confess that her memory is quite unequal to grasping the handles attached to the names of Miss Epperton junior's friends."

Fortunately for Germaine, he was alone in the library when the above curious composition came to his hands. After he had read it once, standing by one of the windows, he took it to the next window and read it again ; and he read it after that by each of the windows in turn—as if with a sort of conviction that the right light had not yet fallen on its contents. Then he sat down in his father's big arm-chair, and remained there for half an hour, staring hard at the letter and pulling bits of fringe off the table-cloth near him. At the end of that half-hour he did the only thing which, being Germaine, he could do ; he went to the writing-table and wrote direct to Maud, asking her

point-blank for an explanation of the mystery. He went straight into the letter, without any "Dear Miss Epperton" to start with.

"I have just heard from your aunt," he wrote. "I had sent her a basket of grapes, and she writes to acknowledge them. She has not been ill, and has had no attack. You were not sent for to nurse her. Did you invent it all? I don't understand; please explain.

"GERMAINE."

This note came to Maud's hands next day in London. It was the day after the long-deferred ball, for the sake of which Lady Euphrosyne, finding no more work to be done in the North, had hastened back to London just as the season was drawing its last gasp. For Maud the ball had been rather a success, something like a solitary summer-day coming in late autumn. Many of the new London beauties had already left town, and Miss Epperton, appearing again after so long a retirement, naturally found herself prized in proportion as

she had made herself precious. She was not at all disposed to over-value her triumph, but for the moment it had put her into a hopeful humour, and made it seem easier to forget Germaine. Ah, it was so much easier to renounce him when the gaze of those big, blue, childish eyes was not upon her!

His note startled her—it was so short and straightforward. It irritated her as well; she always felt provoked with him when he got into what she called his “literal frame of mind.” After all, she could not have her eyes everywhere. It was mortifying, it was ridiculous; her neat little plan was exposed now beyond remedy. “So be it, then,” she thought, with a sudden reckless defiance; “let him have the truth, and let him have it bare, since bare truth is all he cares for. Better, perhaps, and simpler certainly, that the whole thing be cut short at one stroke.” And on the instant she sat down and wrote as follows, unconsciously imitating the style of his note:—

“You have guessed right; I did invent it all.

My aunt has not been ill. I was not sent for. It was you who drove me to it; it was to save you from 'scenes' that I did it. It was a lie, if you will; but the colour of the lie, I think you will agree, was white.

“MAUD EPPERTON.”

The moment the letter was gone Maud felt that she had made a mistake. Once more she had acted on one of those impulses which she was always flattering herself were dead for ever, and which yet had such an awkward habit of reviving at odd moments. After the long strain of incertitude, she had felt as though to decide the question out of all power of reversal would be a relief. But having decided it, she wished the incertitude back again. “Bah!” she said, after a short reflection, “I should have had to break with him sooner or later, only that I would rather have waited until Mr Christopher Swan’s copper was proved to be a myth; but after all, there is no great harm done. Even if they find the copper to-morrow, and my blue-eyed slave becomes once more eligible, it can

only be a question of smiling long enough and sweetly enough in order to bring him back to my feet. All the same, I wish I had not sent the letter. I suppose he will answer me with bitter reproaches—eight pages of them, most likely—in a copy-book hand. Heavens! *quel ennui!*”

But the days passed, and no other letter came from Germaine.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE EXILES.

“ We leave the well-belovèd place
Where first we gazed upon the sky.”

THE last day had come, as all last days do come at last—the last day at Kippendale.

The resolution announced in Lady Baby's letter to Maud was not many weeks old, and to the eyes of all their horrified friends, to the eyes even of the economy-loving Mr Reid, the action of Lord Kippendale and his family appeared precipitate to the verge of folly—and yet upon closer consideration, exactly what was to be expected of these particular people, placed in these particular circumstances. From the moment that Gullyscoombe had become the “next thing,” the old Earl was naturally in a fever to be there. His desire for hurry infected

the others ; it would be a relief to make the plunge even prematurely, to seize that dreadful Gullyscoombe bull by the horns, to step off their worldly pedestal of their own free will, rather than wait till they were knocked off it. Mr Reid, though he might think the move precipitate, was so sincerely thankful to have Kippendale clear of his clients and his clients rid of Kippendale, that he judiciously refrained from throwing so much as a single drop of cold water on the plan. By this time Mr Reid had pretty well made up his mind that "Swan's copper" had never had any existence except in Mr Swan's over-heated brain ; and he had reached the point of wondering what Kippendale would let for, and whether a suitable tenant was likely to be found, supposing he were wanted. But this idea existed as yet only in Mr Reid's most secret thoughts. Better far that the ruined family should say farewell to their old home without this additional wrench of agony ; better far that they should go while they were still in some degree warranted in telling each other that, after all, it was probably "only for a time."

And now the last day had come,—and such a last day! Such a cruelly beautiful last day, intent, it seemed, on turning the beloved Kippendale into the semblance of an earthly paradise from which half-a-dozen poor wretches were about to be expelled. On the October sky not a cloud; on the violet hills in the distance not a speck of mist; in the long-bladed grass the sparkling jewels of a heavy autumn dew; and the trees—oh, surely the trees in their tenderest spring-time youth were never so beautiful as in this golden bravery of their decline! Already their bright leaves have begun to fall; they are scattered broadcast on the lawn like so many pieces of curious coloured coins which lie unheeded just now, but which the wind will pick up some day and hoard away in the sheltered glades, and heap together into the narrow crannies of the hills and the secret corners of the valleys. And not only on the lawn do they lie, they have lined the ditches with a lining of crimson and orange; they have made the banks yellower than the primroses could make them in April, and redder than they

were with the ragged-robin in June ; they have paved the paths in the woods, and have inlaid the very floors of the ponds with a tinted mosaic pavement ; they have flung gaudy stripes of colour across the country roads, and the broad grassy margins at the side—on which so many Bevans, past and present, have trotted to cover, on so many hunting-mornings—are turned by the leaves into paths of beaten gold.

But scant time did there remain for the heart-rending contemplation of all these glories. The carriages were at the door (hired carriages), and the luggage had started for the station. When the family had met at the early and hurried breakfast, they had taken much pains to inform each other that they had slept quite well. If they had wept, they had wept in secret, and been at much pains to efface the traces of their tears, for their spirit was high, and no one of them wished to be the cause of the others' breakdown. Those little sad and senseless good-byes—dumb good-byes to dumb things—were, like their tears, transacted in secret, and in mortal terror of one another.

The breakfast was a rather noisy affair, because no one trusted himself to be silent. Even Agnes talked, and Lady Catherine absolutely rattled. It was some time now since Catherine had hurried to the spot with that mournful alacrity which brings the bird of sad plumage to the scene of a misfortune. But even for Catherine the misfortune was here rather too overwhelming; there was too much of it at once, and it was of too absolute a quality. She was accustomed to take her grief in spoonfuls, not to have it poured down her throat all boiling hot. There are epicures in grief, as in everything else, and the fair-haired widow had always shown her preference for those delicate morsels of sorrow which require an educated palate in order to be tasted. Her sighs were zephyrs, not hurricanes; her tears fell singly, like precious pearls, they did not stream in vulgar torrents.

When the falsely gay and yet so dreary breakfast was over, Lady Baby flew from the house, and did not stand still until she was within the wooden walls of the big kennels,

now empty and deserted of all save Brenda and Fulda the two foxhound puppies, of whom the elder had played so critical a part on Lady Baby's seventeenth birthday. The two dogs came bounding towards her, each describing nothing but one big wriggle from the tip of his tail to the point of his nose, and Lady Baby knelt down on the ground between them, and sobbed at last freely, to the undisguised perplexity of those well-meaning but foolish animals. And presently she was on a further station of her pilgrimage, and stood in the stables, with her hand on the mane of the wary old chestnut, that still paced its loose-box, though the bargain for its sale was already clenched. Ajax was the last of the old friends; even the impudent black pony had been led away with his bright black eyes turned wistfully over his shoulder: nothing but a pair of serviceable carriage-horses was to be taken to Gullyscombe, and no one but Adam and one stable-boy would remain to represent the once so brilliant equestrian staff. Adam was busy at this moment in the next loose-box, looking

very grim and stony, and hissing with unnecessary loudness, perhaps with some hazy notion of discretion, for Lady Baby was sobbing audibly. The fact was that Adam disapproved of those tears, and was inclined to be suspicious of the lengthened good-byes accorded to "A Jacks"; for it must be remembered that Adam had been a constant witness of those riding-lessons in early summer, the result of which had been in his eyes so disastrous.

"Where is he now? Where is he now? Will he ever come back again?" Lady Baby was whispering into Ajax's ear, with her cheek against his sleek neck. But Ajax did not care where *he* was, so he only shook what he still possessed of a mane and snorted with extreme affectation, and Adam hissed the louder, and presently a voice was heard calling for Lady Baby, and she had to pull down her veil over her swollen eyes and hurry off to the house.

"Hurry up!" her father was saying, fussing about uneasily on the doorsteps; "it's the highest time to be off; come along!"

But though he said "come along," Lord

Kippendale himself went back into the house ; and one by one they all went back, telling each other that they had forgotten something. But they had forgotten nothing ; they went back only to steal one more, only one more hungry glance at the home they had lost, who knows for how long — who knows whether not for ever ? To touch once more some familiar piece of furniture ; to sit down again for only one minute on the old window-seat with the tapestry cover. And the end naturally was, that they all stumbled upon each other ; and that after Lord Kippendale had made an attempt to say something cheery about the sea air, and after Agnes had faintly suggested that it would be a pleasant day for travelling, the whole thin pretence broke down, and they wept at last openly, with their heads on each other's shoulders, and wept so long and so violently that they all but succeeded in missing their train.

It was late on the evening of the following day and very dark when they reached their destination. The golden day had been suc-

ceeded by a leaden one. Under the doubtful shelter of the shed which served as a station-house Nicky stood ready to receive them; he had been sent down some days previously in order to make the most necessary arrangements for their reception. His hands were in his pockets, his coat-collar turned up to his ears, and his humour was quite as black as the night itself. To Agnes's hurried and fearful inquiry, "What is it like? Is it so very bad?" he replied with the one simple and expressive word, "Beastly."

It was about the only word that was said; for, when once more under way, they were all too tired to talk, and yet too much on the strain of a painful expectation to doze away in their respective corners, even if the strange vehicle in which they sat had jolted less fearfully, and the heavy leather curtains, which served as window-panes, had not required constant clutching and setting straight in order to keep out the small insinuating rain which seemed bent on making their more intimate acquaintance. They had been jolting along in

this damp darkness for an hour and more, when, at a turn of the road, there fell a new sound on their ears—a subdued, rolling, thunderous sound which told its own tale. They said nothing, but took fast hold of each other's hands, and one or two corners of the leather curtains were lifted and questioning glances were shot out into the darkness. The rush and fall of the waves sounds clearer now, and the muffled lazy roll is broken now and again by a sharper dash that dies away in a long-drawn hiss, as the unseen spray scatters over the unseen rocks. A strong whiff of salt air sweeps in along with the drizzle, but to the questioning glances the darkness gives back the vaguest of answers: only dimly through the black night is there something to be guessed of wide horizons and deserted roads; a half-revelation of naked ridges succeeding each other with a sense of endlessness that makes the travellers' quaking hearts sink down to the heels of their very damp boots. As they turn from that side shuddering, they are confronted on the other by something low and grey and exceedingly grim, even through the dark. They have entered something that

is apparently a yard, for the vehicle bumps over a cobble-stone pavement; there are more greyish buildings around them. An old woman in tears stands at the door—she is Captain John's widow; two boys in pinafores peep all agape round a corner—they are Captain John's grandchildren.

One by one the travellers descended from the lumbering carriage and followed each other to the room which had hurriedly been arranged as "best parlour" for their reception. They were cramped and chilled, and wellnigh faint with hunger. One or two articles of the Kippendale furniture which had been sent down the week before, stood there to greet them; but this pang of recognition was almost the hardest thing to bear: the well-known bookstand looked so strangely out of place standing cheek-by-jowl with poor Captain John's ink-spotted writing-desk; the pet tea-table seemed to have changed its expression, decorated as it now was by two symmetrically placed, pink, frosted vases, containing bouquets of dried sea-weed which Mrs Captain John had put there by way of making things a bit more comfortable. The

fireplace smoked a little, just enough to make one's eyes smart and one's throat itch ; and one of the window-panes had been broken in the yesterday's window-cleaning, and was now provisionally patched with paper, for which Mrs Captain John tearfully apologised, on the ground that it was such a distance for any workman to come. As for the dinner, she apologised likewise, for it was the work of her own willing but unpractised hands ; the new cook (warranted economical), who was due to-day, having backed out of her engagement on account of a panic which had seized her at the want of society which the neighbourhood promised.

Lady Baby, out of sheer weariness of having wept so much, began to laugh at this, and the others followed suit.

“It isn't quite so nice as the old house,” said Lord Kippendale, with a ghastly smile, as he offered his arm to his eldest daughter, “but we are not going to give in just yet. Come to dinner, girls—I am famishing ; and, upon my word, I think we shall do without dressing for to-day.”

CHAPTER XXV.

MAUD HAS AN IDEA.

“La notte è madre di pensieri.”

THE worst of the important moments of life is, that until we have got well past them they so often look exactly like the unimportant moments; and the worst of cross-roads and turning-points is, that unless the roads are real tangible macadamised roads, and unless the turning-point is painted a fine showy colour, likely to catch the eye, you are very liable not to find out where you are until you have either taken the wrong turning on the one or broken your head against the other. How could Lady Baby know that when, on a certain evening in October, she sat down to write another letter to Maud, that letter was going to be a crisis in the

lives of several people? As it was, the crisis was within a hair's-breadth of slipping harmlessly by. Had the letter been worded but a trifle differently, or had Maud's mind not been tuned to the exact pitch which caused it to vibrate in response to one tiny note of suggestion that lurked—unknown to the writer—in one stray paragraph of the letter, a great many things would not have happened which afterwards did happen, and some people would have had fewer lawful complaints against fate.

The pitch to which Maud's mind was tuned the night that letter reached her, was a very low pitch indeed. Five minutes before the knock came at the door, and Lady Euphrosyne's maid, with her hair in curl-papers, had thrust in the letter with a sleepy explanation about its having been overlooked among her ladyship's notes, Maud had been sitting beside her toilet-table with the bodice of a dress across her knee, needle and thread beside her, a thimble on her finger, but her arms hanging idly by her sides. The bodice wanted mending, but it did not seem to have very much

chance of getting it just then, for Maud was allowing herself the unusual indulgence of an unchecked fit of the dumps. Lady Euphrosyne had that afternoon, in the suavest possible manner, announced that she really must tear herself away at last from her beloved London, and fulfil some long-standing engagements to friends in the east of England. Maud was not included in these invitations; the inference was obvious. Her ladyship herself was quite genuinely distressed at the necessary parting. By a thousand little ways, each apparently as slight as a gossamer thread, and yet in reality as strong as those fine fibrous roots by which some sort of creeping plants take their hold on the most inhospitable walls of rock, Maud had contrived to gain footing in Lady Euphrosyne's household. Very soon her ladyship was wondering how she ever had been able to answer all the notes she received without the help of that nice, quiet, sensible Miss Epperton. Maud, meanwhile, had early recognised that if these pleasant quarters were to be kept available for her frequent future reception, a good deal of

diplomacy would be necessary. She had no idea, for instance, of being dislodged from her comfortable corner merely on account of the return of Sir Peter; and therefore, as the time drew near when that jealously guarded stepson might reasonably be expected to reappear, instead of making the most of her personal advantages, she endeavoured rather to convey the impression of a person who has given up her pretensions to youth and who wishes only to be agreeable and unobtrusive. With this object she occasionally refrained from crimping her hair, and the amber silk was more and more rarely donned. Sometimes she debated within herself whether after Sir Peter's return it would not be necessary to pack away the amber silk for good in a box. There were *pros* and *cons* to the question. It was possible, on the one hand, that Lady Euphrosyne might think the "nice, quiet" Miss Epperton not nearly so nice nor so quiet in amber silk as in plain black; but then, on the other hand, it was equally possible that Sir Peter, with his artist's eye, might think quite otherwise. There never had

been any secret about Sir Peter's admiration for her. Living, as she had done for weeks past, under a roof that was in reality Sir Peter's own, it was perhaps only natural that the gratifying recollection of this artistic admiration should occur to her rather more frequently than usual. But it was not quite so natural that the gratification should be mixed with a certain uneasiness; and that, whenever her thoughts did take the shape of wondering when and in what frame of mind Sir Peter would return, she should at once try very hard to think of something else, much as a person who distrusts his own honesty might turn away with a guilty start from a treasure that lies exposed and unguarded before him. What had she got to do with Sir Peter? Sir Peter was Lady Baby's property, and Lady Baby was her friend. Of course—she had got the length of this—if Lady Baby had *not* been her friend, and if one were very desperate, what a fool one would be not to make the most of this novel and singularly advantageous position! Yes, if one were very desperate. . . .

Maud was rather desperate to-night, and that

was perhaps why she turned more hastily than usual from the contemplation of the unguarded treasure, and impatiently snatching up the bodice that wanted mending, began anxiously to consider what remedy would be best applicable to a frayed collar-band. "Piecing will not do it," she sighed; "nor darning either: pitching it into the fire and getting a new bodice would do it best, of course. Oh, ye domestic gods! And it was for this sort of thing that I was to have become Germaine's wife,—for this, that I might have the fun of mending his collar-bands as well as my own; his collar-bands and his stockings—such big stockings, too, and such big holes as he would tramp and stamp and kick into them with those terrific beetle-crushers of his!" She burst out laughing, and right in the middle of the laugh, dashed her hand across her eyes. "I wonder who mends his stockings for him now? He must have worn out a good many pairs tramping about Gullyscoombe after that copper. Oh dear, why is life such a tangle, and fate such a lottery? Why do people go and discover copper-veins if

they cannot live to point them out? Why did not everything remain as it was on the afternoon we arranged the flowers in the dining-room? Why have I got to mend my own collar-bands? And what on earth am I to do with myself when Lady Euphrosyne leaves London?" It was exactly at this moment, when life appeared to be shadowed by one huge point of interrogation, that the knock was heard at the door, the head in curl-papers thrust in, and the belated letter tendered, accompanied by the sleepy explanation.

The sight of the handwriting struck rather painfully upon Maud. Certain thoughts which a few minutes back had been in her mind, certain possibilities which had obtruded themselves upon her notice, and not for the first time either, made her feel that there was something almost disconcerting about the broad stare of those round childish letters. But a second impression soon swept aside the first. The letter felt thick between her fingers, as letters do that contain announcements of importance and form epochs in our lives; what if this letter were to

contain an announcement and mark an epoch? The copper! Her guesses flew straight to the copper. The appearance of this letter at this particular moment had so stirred her imagination that, with a half-superstitious conviction that here was sealed up the answer to all those disjointed questions which she had just been flinging in the face of fate, Maud paused for a minute with the unopened paper in her hand, as though to enhance her own expectation. The copper was found; yes, that was how it would be. The copper was found, and everything would again be as it had been on the day when she and Germaine had arranged the flowers in the dining-room.

Alas, no! the copper was not found; her first glance told her that. Indeed there appeared at first sight to be nothing very special in the letter, the close-written pages being filled with a minute description of their new home which Maud, in her disappointment, decided would keep till daylight. It was not till the second-last page that a few words caught her eye and induced her to turn back with more attention to

the head of the paragraph. The passage which had aroused her curiosity ran as follows :—

“All the others laugh at me about it, but you—even if you don’t believe, at least you don’t laugh. I can’t tell you how many miles I have walked already, or how many blades of penknives I have broken in cutting twigs. I am afraid there can by this time be no doubt that I have *not* got the ‘virtue’ of the divining-rod. But then there always remains the possibility of hitting upon some one else who has. For this purpose I have drawn the covers of the village. On the whole it is discouraging work, though a great many of the old miners believe in the rod, even if they don’t use it. Some of them again, the very religious ones, call divining-rods ‘unholy sticks’; and this reminds me of one of my recent acquaintances, an old crooked shoemaker, who lives, not in the village, but all by himself on the most desolate part of the estate, where the daft creature has set up a workshop in one corner of some old mine-buildings. His room is like a case of curiosities, but the greatest curiosity in it is himself. I shouldn’t

be done to-night if I were to tell you about all his oddnesses, and his horrible temper, and his beautiful cat. For one thing, he is very *jumpy*, if you know what I mean; he skipped very nearly over a stool when he heard my name, but it was with fright apparently, and not with joy, though I didn't see the reason. What made me think that I had at last found my long-sought diviner was that, among the curious things in the room, I suddenly caught sight of two of the well-known forked twigs hung up neatly on the wall like two crossed swords. A minute before I had been examining one of his chimney-piece ornaments, a sort of very hideous little mound, like one of our Scotch cairns in miniature, only composed of bits of copper-ore (like those we had in the glass case at Kippendale), and gummed on the top of each other. Just as I turned to ask him where he picked up his specimens, I caught sight of the dowsing-rods on the wall and I flew at them. 'Oh, are you a diviner?' I asked. 'Can you make the rod work? Was it with these you found the copper for your cairn?'

It was rather a stupid thing to say, for of course there is no lack of these copper-samples all over the country, but I don't know why it should have made him jump again, higher than the first time. He rocked his body and groaned out that heaven might strike him dead if he were a diviner,—that he could no more make those 'unholy sticks' work than he could make sea-boots out of rat-skins. I asked him why, if he thought them unholy, he had them on his wall, and he went on rocking his body and moaned, 'As keepsakes, to be sure.' I asked of whom? and he said, 'Of a friend.' When I hopefully inquired after the friend, he once more crushed my hopes by informing me that the friend had been dead for thirty years and more, and that the sea-weed had very likely woven a fine shroud for him by this time, seeing that he had been drowned at sea. He became quite voluble over it, though up to the moment of my noticing the rods he had been just as uncommunicative as the boot he was mending. But the divining-rod had certainly stirred him up; he even left

the boot and took me out to the mouth of the old mine-shaft close by, in order to show me where he had picked up his copper-samples. I suppose he was determined to prove to me that the unholy dowsing-rod had nothing to do with his beautifully gummed cairn. I humoured him, because I saw that he was very excited, but it only made me feel more sure that the poor creature is cracked. It was altogether just like a chapter in a novel, and you are the first person who has had the chapter whole. The others are so discouraging, all taken up with those despairing engineers, either bullying them (that's papa), or plodding along mentally, if not physically, in their footsteps (that's Agnes); in any case, they have eyes and ears for nothing but *shoding-pits* and *impregnations*; and whenever I begin to tell them about my adventures, they just laugh and tell me that I have got divining-rod on the brain. So now I have turned stiff and don't tell them. The only result of that expedition is, that papa has taken fright about my being garotted among the moors, and has put a stop to my long walks. I am

therefore reduced again to the home-covers. Yesterday I paid a visit to an old rattle-trap of a granny,"—and the letter proceeded to describe another interior with much vividness and detail; but Maud's glance no more than skimmed this second picture: there was nothing about it that appealed either to her curiosity or to her imagination, while about the first there was something that appealed to both.

She read things in that letter which Lady Baby was utterly unconscious of having written there. Without having any suspicions of her own—partly perhaps because suspicions were not much in her line, and partly because her interest in the eccentric shoemaker was only one shade stronger than the interest she felt in the old miner she had visited the day before, or the old granny she had visited the day after—Lady Baby had yet thoroughly succeeded in awakening suspicions in Maud, and without being distinctly aware of the suggestion of mystery about her adventure, she had yet very faithfully transferred that mysterious flavour to her bare statement of the facts. Looked at with

Maud's eyes and from Maud's position, unimportant details fell away, and one distinctly suspicious circumstance stood staring her in the face.

She had not done folding up the letter before she said to herself: "That man has something to hide, and it is from that family in particular that he wants to hide it; why else should he have been scared at the name of Bevan?" Slowly slipping back the letter into the envelope, she reflected further thus: "The thing that he wants to hide has got something to do with that copper cairn of his, and it is quite evident that wherever he may have picked up his samples, it certainly was *not* at the mouth of that old shaft—upon that I will cheerfully take my oath. If he did not pick them up there, he must have picked them up somewhere else. Query—Where is this somewhere else, and whence this secrecy? Could it be—no, surely it could not be——" and tearing the letter from the envelope, Maud greedily read over the passage for the third time. When she had done reading it, she sat down rather suddenly on her chair, and stared fixedly at the ceiling. Her

mind had been working out the problem in a series of leaps, but the final leap had landed her in the thick of such a very surprising conclusion, that, for an instant, it stopped her breath. Could it be that her wild guess was right after all? Could it be that this bootmaking maniac knew something of the lost copper? "All very well," said the cool side of Maud's mind—for Maud had a cool and a hot side to her mind—just as an apple has a sunburnt cheek and a pale one,—“all very well; but seeing that the reward offered would be enough to keep him in comfort—and leather—for the rest of his days, why does the old bootmaking maniac not speak out?” “Perhaps *because* he is a maniac,” suggested the opposition voice. But the cool side declined to take the answer; though on the point of there being a mystery about this—what was his name? Samuel Foote—and that mystery connected with the lost copper, both heated fancy and cool common-sense were very speedily agreed.

The frayed collar was not mended that night; Maud decided that she was not calm enough to

make straight stitches. The tiny seed which had slipped from between the pages of that letter was growing fast. It had not been sown five minutes, and already it had struck deep roots—all the deeper, no doubt, for the soil on which it had fallen being in a singularly eager and receptive state—greedy for any chance that might fall that way. Soon she was losing herself in astonishment over Lady Baby's inexplicable blindness. "The child must indeed have divining-rods on the brain to have so completely overlooked the real points of the case." The divining-rods were the part of the subject to which Maud gave the least attention, which she swept aside with contemptuous disregard; and with all her ingenuity, it never struck her that in so doing she herself was overlooking a feature of the case that was quite as important as Samuel Foote's attitude towards his copper-cairn. Such is the imperfection of human reasoning, and so completely are we at the mercy of the faintest breath of chance.

Maud's pillow, for all that it was covered with the finest linen, felt very rough and very hot

that night ; the blankets weighed like lead ; the Chinese birds upon the bed - curtains twisted themselves into imaginary portraits of the enigmatical shoemaker, and the songs which they piped in her broken dreams were all about Samuel Foote. Looked at from this distance, Samuel Foote was as provoking and also as incomplete as the first half of a riddle, the half without the answer. He was one of those things that demand explanation ; and Maud, who had no patience with mysteries, felt certain that the explanation must be somewhere close at hand. It must have been getting on towards the small hours when she started broad awake, and sat up straight in bed. The leap which her mind had given last night had, after all, not been the final one. For now, lashed on by the whip of nightmare, it had leapt forward once again, and the effort, unconscious as it was, had awakened her. She believed that what she stood on now was firm ground ; she believed that what she held now was verily the end of the clue. It was but a revival of an old theory of hers, cast aside and half forgotten ; the

theory about Molly having told tales out of school. Why should not Samuel Foote be one of the Destroying Angel's victims of old? Why should it not have been from the Angel herself that he had gained his knowledge,—which, for some reason yet to be penetrated, he chose to keep to himself? Flashing down upon her in the dead of night, the suggestion, if it did not bear conviction with it, did at least serve to consolidate her first general suspicions of Samuel Foote, to guide them into a distinct channel—to give them just so much colour and just so much form as would make them worth further investigation. So confident, indeed, did she feel of having hit on the *mot de l'énigme*, that her first instinct, seeing that, at any rate, she could not sleep, was to light a candle and write off straight to Gullyscombe, advocating an immediate and searching cross-examination of the shoemaker. She had even got so far as lighting the candle, but before she had got further another thought intervened, and she blew the candle out and lay down again. It had occurred to her that

she had once been told by a successful whist-player that he made it his invariable rule never to play a trump-card without looking at it twice. If there was anything at all in her somewhat frantic surmise, she undoubtedly held a trump-card in her hand, and she would look at it twice before she played it. To put her friends on the track of the quarry which they had been too thick-skulled or too obstinate to scent for themselves, might be handing them back their lost fortune. They would be rich again. Germaine would be rich again. How, exactly, did she stand with Germaine?

The question brought a little tremor with it, a little uneasiness for the future; but the trump-card she held in her hand, if it was a trump-card, could not fail to influence that future very seriously. So much might depend upon the exact moment at which it was played, and then there were so many different ways of playing it. To write to Lady Baby, and put the end of the clue into her hands, would be one way, and not a very satisfactory way either, seeing that that clue might, after

all, prove to have been a mere bubble of her fancy, in which case she would cut a very well-meaning but somewhat ridiculous figure. Then there was the way of keeping the clue in her own hands and working it out with her own brains, until it proved itself either a failure or a success: if a failure, nothing more need be said about it; if a success, everything would end like a fairy tale—for what question about small scruples of veracity could there exist between any one Bevan and the good fairy from whose hands the family received back its restored fortune? The plan was tempting enough; but the means? The only chance of success pointed its finger straight at Samuel Foote himself. A course of cross-examination by letter was weighed in the balance and found wanting. The same course verbally carried out, was the suggestion that inevitably grew out of the first, and out of it in turn was evolved the equally inevitable logical conclusion that Maud's choice lay between visiting Gullyscoombe in person or throwing her plan to the winds.

As she lay there in the dark her pulses were throbbing tumultuously. The difficulties of the case had greatly stimulated her nerves, and the mystery about it had awakened the detective in her. She had spoken truly, though she had spoken in jest, when she had confessed to Lord Kippendale her talents in that line. "And I said all along that a detective was what they wanted, quite as much as an engineer," said Maud, staring still into the darkness. The resolve to play that detective's part, to play it in the teeth of all difficulties, already stood firm within her. In after days she used to wonder greatly at the violence with which she had embraced her *rôle*. At the moment she was not disposed to analyse the elements of this enthusiastic violence, or she might have discovered among them a certain fanatical desire to be convinced by her own creed, a certain eager grasping at a treasure which she believed to be legitimately her own,—to which, at any rate, she had more right than to that other treasure which a little time back she had been contemplating

with an uneasy conscience, and—must it be confessed?—itching fingers.

Yes, the detective should be played; but how? To offer a visit to Gullyscoombe was out of the question, for many reasons; to reach that neighbourhood was imperative. Wild plans flitted through her brain, presentable perhaps when looked at in the dead of night; but Maud felt a vague, and by degrees a more and more drowsy conviction, that not one of them would stand the test of daylight; and it was with that “how?” still upon her lips that she at last fell asleep in good earnest.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A CHANCE MEETING.

“ My love is as a fever, longing still
For that which longer nurseth the disease.”

HER ladyship was dining out, and so was her ladyship's *protégée*. Considering how stark-dead the season was, the dinner-table presented a wonderfully respectable appearance, and after dinner more guests arrived, bringing with them rolls of music and instrument-cases of such divers shapes and sizes that the unmusical people began to feel doubtful about their dinner digestion ; but they covered their doubts with a smile, for this was a musical house. Maud, listening languidly to a harp-solo played by a young lady who had acquired a much-admired execution at the expense of her spine and her

complexion, all at once heard some one behind her ask in a whisper, "Who is that bored-looking individual in the doorway? Doesn't he look as if he had had just this harp-solo played to him all his life, and were gorged with it?"

"Or with anything else in the world as well," said another voice in answer; "it isn't harp-solos in particular that he is gorged with; it is life in general."

Maud turned her head in the direction indicated, and saw Mr Carbury standing in the doorway, with folded arms and a look of patient misery on his face. She had expected to see him when she turned; the remarks she had overheard fitted him as well as his own coat fitted him.

The sallow lady with the injured spine and the beautiful execution had just struck her last chord, and, amidst deafening applause, was being led away to lie down flat on a sofa. Under cover of the general commotion, Maud left her place and moved towards the door where Mr Carbury stood. At the same instant he moved

away from it in an opposite direction. It might have been mere accident, he might not have seen her, and yet Maud had fancied that their glances had just crossed.

Exactly the same thing happened a little later in the evening, and this time there was obviously no accident about it. "What ever is the matter with the man?" thought Maud, rather amused, a good deal puzzled, and perhaps a trifle mortified. Up to that moment she had not cared particularly whether or not she had a talk with Mr Carbury, whom she had not seen since the Kippendale days. She now determined that she would have the talk. And of course she had it. Mr Carbury might just as well have given in to his fate with a good grace at once, instead of manœuvring about the rooms in avoidance of Miss Epperton, only to be out-manceuvred by Miss Epperton, and presently to find himself launched full sail on a *tête-à-tête* with her in one of the most retired corners of the room.

"To begin at the beginning," said Maud, "what makes you run away from me?"

Of course Mr Carbury disclaimed all idea of

running away, but he did so with a certain ruffled dignity which, instead of allaying Maud's curiosity, only increased it. She was accustomed to see him on the defensive, armed to the teeth, as it were, against any atom of ridicule which might by any possibility be anywhere at large within striking distance of his person; but this stand-off attitude of to-night was something quite distinct and by itself. It was with an individual and not a general mistrust that he was watching her, as though doubtful of her intentions.

"It cannot be that you are afraid of me," said Maud, disregarding his stiff disclaimer, "for *you* know that *I* know you too well to expect you to exert yourself beyond bringing me an ice perhaps, *tout au plus*. It cannot be that you are bored with me, because you haven't seen me for three months, though, for the matter of that, I don't believe that has anything to do with it. I believe you were *blasé* as a baby; I believe you were bored to death by your first rattle."

"Very possibly I was," said Carbury, eyeing her a shade more suspiciously, "more especially if it rattled much."

Maud shook her head. "It was a great mistake, Mr Carbury, and it was the first of a very long series of mistakes which you have been making ever since. Shall I tell you why life bores you so? It is because you look at it through one pair of eyes and listen to it with one pair of ears. It is because everything to you tastes of yourself. Now the really artistic egotism is to help yourself to other people's eyes and ears. Look at me, for instance,—have you ever seen me bored by any mortal thing? But you, who will persist in looking at everything from one single point of view, how can you wonder that you should be for ever getting the same lights and the same shades, that everything should look the same shape, the same colour, the same everything?"

"The violin trio is just beginning," said Mr Carbury with undisguised irritation; "had we not better get nearer?" and he half rose from his chair.

"No, thanks," said Maud, settling herself more comfortably. "I have had enough music for to-night, and we have only just begun to

talk. Don't you know that we ought to be mingling our condolences? Have you forgotten under what roof we last met? Have you no neat speech to make about the ruin of our friends?"

Maud spoke gaily, with her eyes on Carbury's face. She saw him give a very slight start, the sort of shiver that men give when an open wound is touched. Then he pulled himself together.

"They were scarcely my friends," he said, harshly. "I never saw them before the day that that crank-axle broke. I can't call them more than acquaintances."

"But even the ruin of one's acquaintances may distress one a little, I suppose?"

"Every one has to take their share of bad luck," said Carbury, almost violently. "And I don't suppose it's worse for them than for any one else." Then he turned impatiently, as though aware of Maud's laughing eyes upon him. "It doesn't seem to distress you much, at any rate, Miss Epperton. I never saw you in better spirits."

"That is because I reflect that every ruin is not irretrievable." And again Maud laughed.

There was no denying that she was in exceptionally good spirits that night. Her laugh came readily, the exultant sparkle of her eye seemed to denote that she was hugging to her heart some secret cause for satisfaction. "I was in the thick of it, you know," she continued lightly. "If you had not evacuated Kippendale with that tragic suddenness, just twelve hours too soon, you would have been in the thick of it too."

"I am not aware that there was anything either tragic or sudden about my departure from Kippendale," said Mr Carbury, sitting very bolt-upright in his chair. "It was business that called me away," he haughtily continued; "at least, so far as I can recall the circumstances. I am not sure that I exactly remember what it was that caused me to leave Scotland that day: at any rate, it was nothing vital," finished Carbury, in a carefully steadied voice; and he eyed Maud with a distinct challenge, a sort of "laugh-if-you-dare" expression of countenance, which so nearly upset her gravity that she felt for a moment compelled to hide her face behind her

fan. A light had broken in upon her. By dint of apologising for his departure he had succeeded in reminding Maud that an apology was necessary, by dint of giving explanations he had called her attention to the fact that such an explanation had hitherto been wanting. Her own wit, aided by a backward glance, did the rest. She had some difficulty in not choking behind her fan. So this was masculine ingenuity? She had heard of the thing before, but she had never seen it in quite so curious a shape. So that was why he had fled so perseveringly to-night, and had lowered so sulkily when brought to bay? Maud had never heard a full account of that scene in the conservatory, but from words and hints dropped, and conclusions drawn, she had got pretty near the truth; and she perfectly understood why, as being in a sort of way one of the witnesses of his discomfiture, she should be so distasteful to Mr Carbury. "And to think that, but for his running away, I never should have dreamt of pursuing him; and but for his sticking up a screen, it never would have occurred to me to

try and find out what there was on the other side!" Thus reflected Maud, biting her lips in silence. "If he knew how deeply he has let me into his secrets, I believe his reason would totter. I declare until to-night I looked on the thing as a fancy, but after to-night I am not sure, I am not at all sure, whether it doesn't belong to the category of passions. I should like to find out; the man amuses me."

When Maud's face emerged again from over her fan, it was perfectly composed. The silence, however full it may have been, had been short—just long enough, in fact, to make an apparent change of subject seem quite natural.

"Have you any messages for our friends?" she serenely inquired. "It is not unlikely that I may have an opportunity of meeting them soon."

This was the experiment by means of which Maud had very rapidly decided to "find out."

"You are going there? To Gullyscoombe? To stay with them?"

Mr Carbury's brown face had grown quite white; he spoke with a catch in his breath,

and clutched at the arm of Maud's chair. Maud noticed nothing, apparently. She was not looking at him, but at a Japanese cabinet against the wall, and yet she could have told Mr Carbury's complexion to a shade and the look in his eyes to a sparkle.

"No, I am not going to stay with them; but I am going to spend a few weeks on that coast. Little Hal Wyndhurst, Lady Euphrosyne's youngest boy, is in bad health; he has been ordered to some quiet seaside place. Lady Euphrosyne's engagements being numerous and pressing, she has consented to intrust him to my care. Floundershayle, it now appears, is only some three miles distant from Gullyscoombe House. That is why I asked you whether you had any messages."

This gave Mr Carbury the chance of picking up the fragments of his scattered self-possession, which he was not slow to do—Miss Epperton all the time studying the Japanese cabinet.

"Oh, that's it; I see," he said, leaning back in his chair with elaborate carelessness. The rigid and defiant attitude was dropped now as

superfluous, since it was evident that, after all, Miss Epperton was not so quick at suspecting things as he had imagined. "Well—no," he drawled, languidly. "As for messages, I really don't know. By the by, is it a fact that the marriage is put off?"

"Put off? It is broken off."

Mr Carbury waited for a minute before speaking again; there was something in his throat that might have interfered with his drawl if he had spoken at once. A wild curiosity was tearing at his heart-strings, a dozen questions were burning on his tongue. He had never quite understood the sequel of that affair; he had never quite comprehended why an announcement which he had been looking for with dread—the news of a broken engagement renewed—had not yet become an accomplished fact. He had waited for it as one waits for a thunderbolt, and felt harassed by its non-appearance as a man might feel provoked with the thunderbolt for keeping him so long on thorns.

"How did the marriage come to be broken off?" he asked abruptly.

“They quarrelled.”

“Yes, I know about that. But after that came the catastrophe,—how is it that that did not bring Wyndhurst back?”

Maud shrugged her shoulders. “The North Sea is a long way off, at least some parts of it are.”

Carbury understood immediately that Sir Peter knew nothing of the catastrophe. “Oh, is it so? Then the events to come are as clear as the sun at noonday. He returns, hears of the misfortune, offers himself, and is accepted.”

“Yes,” said Maud, “offers himself, but is rejected.”

“What makes you think so?”

“Have you forgotten that Lady Baby is a pauper and that Sir Peter is a millionaire?”

“Oh, I see,—scruples about pride and honour, and so on; they will be overcome.”

“Not so easily as you think. I happen to know that Lady Baby has declared her distinct intention of not accepting Sir Peter’s addresses—his charity she calls it—so long as she is a beggar.”

Carbury was listening with strained attention. "But such a declaration is nonsensical; it could bind no one."

"No one perhaps but Lady Baby."

"Are you sure about this?" he asked quickly.

"Quite sure. In fact——" and then Maud broke off abruptly. No, it would undoubtedly be indiscreet to mention to Mr Carbury a certain very much blotted and wildly scrawled little note which, in a sudden fit of confidence, Lady Euphrosyne had shown her only the other day. The fact of its existence would probably be very comforting to this rejected lover; but, though Maud felt very sorry for him, she did not feel justified in administering comfort in exactly this shape. She had already said more than she had ever intended to say.

"Then that was not what you meant about the ruin not being irretrievable?" remarked Carbury. "You said something of the sort just now."

"I? Oh, I was speaking in general, about ruin in the abstract. How should I know any-

thing about the chances of this ruin in particular? Our poor friends are beggars just at present; and for anything I know, they may end by being buried in paupers' graves."

"That would indeed be a come-down for their ladyships," said Carbury, with so cruel a gleam in his eyes that Maud looked at him in astonishment.

"Mr Carbury!" she said on an impulse, "I should not like to have you for an enemy. Revenge is almost gone out of fashion, I know, but you look as though you had it in you to be implacable."

Carbury drew himself up stiffly; his face had frozen again into its habitual listlessness. "Who ever said that I had any cause for anything so melodramatic as revenge?" he inquired, distantly. "It strikes me that we are getting off our subject. When did you say that you make your start?"

"Next week," said Maud; and then there fell another silence between them, filled most conveniently by the shrieks of the three fiddles.

"I suppose," said Mr Carbury slowly, after that silence,—“I suppose that that village—Floundershayle you called it—is nothing but a wretched little fishy hole?”

“Well, it will be provincial, to put it mildly,” said Maud, in some surprise.

“And I suppose it hasn’t got any shops?”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. I daresay one will be able to buy fish-hooks, and perhaps even woollen jerseys.”

“Then how will you do about getting things?—books, or paper, or so on?”

“Write for them, I suppose.”

Carbury sat still for a moment, gnawing his black moustache, and gazing at his crush-hat with an expression of scorn and disgust which seemed quite inapplicable to that most faultless and exquisite article of attire.

“Look here,” he broke out in the most ungracious of tones, “I am not at all bad at choosing books, or, in fact, at commissions of any sort—even ribbons, you know, and,”—he paused, and seemed to swallow something dry in his throat, something that must

have had a bad taste too, to judge from his expression,—“and—hats. And I haven’t got anything else special to do just at present. If you like you may drop me a line when you want a thing; I should be very”—another gulp—“glad to get it for you, and I shouldn’t mind it much, really.”

He broke off fiercely, and glared at Maud for her answer.

She had resumed her examination of the cabinet. Right through the scorn of the tone she had rightly construed the drift of this unlooked-for address, and had understood that it was the part of underground passage which was once more being offered her. She was no longer surprised. She was not quite sure whether she was not a little touched. For Mr Carbury to offer to incommode himself to the point of choosing a book for any one but himself was quite as startling as a three-hundred-mile journey undertaken by another. But while she thought thus she was speaking differently.

“What a capital idea!” she was saying, quite as calmly as though the proposition just

made was of the most ordinary and everyday sort, and as though there was nothing in the least humorous about Mr Carbury choosing her hats. "To tell the truth, I had never thought of that difficulty; but now that I come to consider it, I should have been rather put about for a connecting-link with civilisation. You will fill the post admirably."

Maud had no objection at all to being used as underground passage, for, except when her own interest came in the way, she was always good-natured.

"It's a bargain then," Mr Carbury was saying hurriedly, just as the quiet corner was invaded; "and when you send me a line about the thing, whatever it is, you might just as well mention what the place is really like."

"And how it agrees with our friends?" added Maud, demurely.

"Not quite so well as Kippendale, I fancy," said Carbury, with another of those smiles which had startled Maud a minute ago; and then, meeting her eyes, he turned sharply away, and she saw him no more that night.

Up to that last moment Maud had, in sheer mercy, avoided his face; but in that one glance she had learnt everything that she wanted to know.

“That child has very much more to answer for than she has any idea of,” said Maud to herself, a little awe-stricken, perhaps, in the depth of her heart, as one is ever apt to be awe-stricken by a glimpse, however passing, of a genuine human passion unmasked,—of what it can put into a man’s eyes, of how pitifully plain it can stand written on even a worldling’s face.

“I believe that man would do any mortal thing if he thought he had the ghost of a chance,” reflected Maud that night on the homeward drive;—“any mortal thing, though I daresay he is not aware of that himself.” And this again was one of those unrecognised turning-points which we pass blindfolded. It was not till some time afterwards that Maud recalled this reflection of hers, or that its full import and meaning was borne in upon her. Just now her attention was taken up by preparations for the seaside trip.

The manner in which this said trip had come to be arranged requires some further explanation. Maud, having once made up her mind that, by fair means or foul, she would transport herself to within reach of the mysterious shoemaker, had been devoting the whole energies of her mind to discovering an answer to that "How?" immersed in the consideration of which she had gone to sleep a few days ago.

"Shall I discover a colony of country cousins in some remote village?" she reflected, seriously turning over the various schemes in her mind; "or shall I get shipwrecked on the coast, and require to spend a fortnight in a fisherman's hut, in order to set up my nerves?" She shook her head; the right thing had not yet been hit on. But Providence helps those that help themselves. If you sit all day long with your eyes wide open, and your ten fingers spread ready to catch at the merest rag of a chance, you generally end by finding means to accomplish your object.

Little Hal Wyndhurst had recently had a

fall from his pony, and had been ailing ever since then, growing rather black about the eyes, and yellow about the throat. "A shock to the nervous system" had been the diagnosis, and "country air" the prescription. Accordingly it had been settled that when Lady Euphrosyne started on her fashionable visits, the five cherubs, with their six attending spirits, should be packed off to Nolesworth.

"Now, just supposing," thought Maud—"just supposing that that dear, delightful, intelligent, *good-looking* doctor had said 'sea air,' instead of 'country air'! Supposing he could be got to say so still!"

When this dear, delightful, intelligent, good-looking person paid his next professional visit, Miss Epperton happened to be in the room. He was undoubtedly good-looking, and very charming, quite the most charming medical adviser agoing, and not at all like a doctor to look at. Also there was something delightfully unprofessional about his smile and the soft impressionability of his glance. No rigidity of opinion, no rigour of prescription; it was

entirely by the happy knack of reading the wishes of his fair patients from out of their blue or black, fiery or languishing eyes, that Sir Ambrose Cathcart had become Sir Ambrose.

“Go by your own feeling, certainly; the great thing in these cases is to go by your own feeling,” was the smooth formula, ready at any moment to trip from off the extreme point of his tongue, and calculated to make happy the heart of an overworked *élégante*, whose husband was for dragging her off to the repose of the country, but whose “own feeling” was that she would die for want of the London season.

“Change of air?” said Maud, in the course of this professional visit, “but is that enough? Ought there not also to be a complete change of scene? I know nothing about it at all, Sir Ambrose,”—with a little *naïve* laugh which helped to bewilder him with a flash of white teeth,—“but I always fancied that unfamiliar surroundings were nowadays considered the thing for shattered nerves; and Nolesworth

can't exactly be described as unfamiliar to poor little Hal."

"Quite so, Miss Epperton, your observation is of the most just. Also, it would be preferable if, instead of going to Nolesworth, he were to——"

"Ah, I know what you are going to say," broke in Maud; "go to the seaside. Was not that it, Sir Ambrose? I know that you always prescribe salt air for nerves."

"Your observation is just," said Sir Ambrose Cathcart, glibly, wincing just a little under the volley of "Epperton glances" which Maud was firing down upon him. "My usual prescription of course; and if the feeling of the patient——"

"Hal," said Maud, gaily, drawing the pale boy towards her, "what is your feeling about going to the seaside?"

The patient thus consulted, aged eight, confessed to feelings which entirely favoured the seaside plan. How could it be otherwise, after all the delightful things about star-fish and cockle-shells, and pink-and-lilac sea-anemones which he had heard of last night when "Cousin

Eppy" — as the little Wyndhursts playfully called Maud — had come to sit on the side of his bed, and put him to sleep with stories?

As the great thing was to go by one's own feeling, the matter was here clenched. Lady Euphrosyne looked rather perplexed when she heard of the doctor's decision. She had been out during the visit. What was she to do? Give up her visits in order to take Hal to the seaside? Send down the whole colony of eleven to eat their heads off at Brighton at a ruinous expense? Send Hal down alone with a nurse? No nurse was to be trusted at a place of that sort; at Nolesworth it was a different thing. What on earth was to be done?

It was then that Maud stepped in and offered to play Providence to Hal and his nurse. She had no special engagements for the next fortnight; would Lady Euphrosyne trust her? Lady Euphrosyne not only trusted her, but took her in her arms and kissed her, so delighted was she at her own escape; and she ended by leaving the arrangements for the

expedition, and even the choice of the place, entirely in Maud's hands. For two days Maud appeared to be studying this question, and then she spoke to Lady Euphrosyne about a delightful little village on the sea-coast which she had heard of. "Quite a simple, lovely little fishing village, you know; not at all a fashionable place, but so free and healthy and retired. Does it not sound charming?"

Lady Euphrosyne thought it sounded very dull; but, after all, it was not she who was expected to go there. She was very fond of little Hal, but she was not fond of tiresome details. In fact, she did not clearly understand where exactly was situated this romantic fishing village to which her youngest cherub was to be taken; but she left everything to Miss Epperton, Miss Epperton was so sensible.

Maud felt pleased with herself. It was, in fact, a masterly *coup*. It was killing two very pretty birds with one neat little stone. It was gaining the object she had just then at heart, and it was at the same time retaining, nay, even improving, her position in Lady Euphro-

syne's household — a circumstance which, considering the uncertainty of that object, was not to be despised. For Maud never for a moment forgot that her theory had yet to be proved, and she had no mind whatever to fall between two stools.

CHAPTER XXVII.

SAMUEL FOOTÈ.

“ And, always, 'tis the saddest sight to see,
An old man faithless in Humanity.”

TAKEN as a whole, Floundershayle was a singularly grey place, though grey, it is true, in many different shades. There was the dull grey of the rocks, the chilly grey of the huddled houses, topped by the bluish-grey of their slate-roofs; there was the leaden grey of the waves, and there was the stormy grey of a low-hanging sky, rarely lightened at this season by so much as a watery sunbeam. Taken as a whole, Floundershayle was also a singularly serious place. Perhaps it was because of its being so grey that it was so serious; or perhaps what had given to the villagers that set cast of counte-

nance, and even to the children that solemn stare, was the anxiety of the life they lived, the tooth-and-nail struggle with wind and waves by which the majority of them gained their bread. Men who, on an average, look death in the face not less than once a-week, are not generally given to viewing life from a light-hearted or a flippant point of view. Children whose fathers, or if not their fathers their uncles, or if not their uncles their grandfathers, have come to an untimely end in pursuit of their watery calling, are wont to draw their early impressions, those impressions that mould character, from nights of terror and scenes of grief; to have their games broken off by the exigencies of desperate rescues, and their laughter drowned by the wailing of their mothers and the weeping of their sisters. Windows that are for ever being shaken by the wind are apt to droop in their sockets to a half-melancholy, half-drunken angle, which cannot fail to impart a certain desolation to the scene which they are supposed to frame; panes that are for ever crusted with the salt of flying spray cannot be expected to blink so brightly as their inland

brethren ; walls that have stood there patiently to be beaten and buffeted from year to year, their faces scarred by a hundred storms, the doorsteps at their feet eaten into by the eager breath of the sea, will never smile at the wanderer with that cheery welcome which happy farmhouses, or thatched cottages in sheltered dells, can so cheaply give. The very door—framed, as it very likely is, from the remains of a ship that has gone to pieces on the rocks before your eyes—can scarcely be entered with quite the same vacuity of thought that would be perfectly in place in the farmhouse or the cottage.

So, whether it was that the village was haunted by the ghosts of drowned fishermen, or whether it was that it was shadowed by the curses of shipwrecked mariners—such mariners, namely, who, according to wicked old stories about that Choughshire coast, had been shipwrecked not quite by accident—Floundershayle was grey, and it was serious. No doubt the granite had more to do with it than anything else. The rocks were granite ; out of great

square blocks of this same granite the houses were built, and with great slabs of granite the pig-sties were enclosed; lumps of granite paved the tortuous streets, and stiles of granite intercepted the paths. No golden thatch, no rosy flush of bricks—all grey stone and grey slate.

But of course it was not all grey, or flesh and blood could not have stood it. There is nothing so bad but it has its extenuating circumstances. The little steep stony streets climbing up and down the uneven ground were brightened here and there by rough attempts at gardening. Coming suddenly round a straggly corner, or emerging from out of the most curiously twisted byway, it was a relief to find a fuchsia still in flower nailed against a sheltered scrap of wall, and nodding its many red heads at you in the breeze; or to stumble upon little odd corners of garden, of any shape and in any position, three-cornered or square, a strip or a patch, screening themselves from the sea-air as best they could, and chock-full just now of somewhat battered autumn flowers,—of asters and

marigolds and dahlias, all with very thick juicy stalks, and very big round heads, fed and fattened as they were by fish-refuse and sea-weed manure. And here, too, the remains of defunct vessels come in most conveniently; for if Dick Trebellin's patch of "escalony" was fenced in with what had once formed part of the cabin-work of that Dutch ship that was wrecked last year, Bob Penly had been even more fortunate in securing for his geranium-bed three yards of green trellis-work, which no one would have recognised as the poop of that unfortunate German vessel that six years ago was lost with all hands. But as the demand for the precious spars was great, and as ships were not wrecked every day even at Floundershayle, it was only a favoured few who were the proud possessors of wooden palings. Half-a-dozen granite boulders pushed together so as to form a rough wall was the common thing; or occasionally an old fishing-net, stretched from one stake to another, ended its existence in the character of an impromptu garden-hedge.

It must have been in obedience to the law of

compensation that the Floundershayle villagers cultivated their tangled gardens. The red and the yellow of these bright patches was the natural antidote to the grey of the granite, and their perfume, no doubt, was equally the antidote to the other perfumes of the place. For, in addition to being grey and to being serious, the village also, unfortunately, was very highly scented, and not exclusively with the breath of flowers. It smelt of fish in every shape, and also, alas! in every stage; of fish cooked, uncooked, and cooking; of fish plump and lean, flat and long, fresh-caught and stale. It smelt also of nets hung up to dry, of wet boots put out to sun, of boats pulled up on the beach, of a great many square yards of wood and wool and leather, which had been saturated, and thrice saturated, with seawater.

Floundershayle had a church with a square tower, it had a post-office, and it had also an inn. This inn stood at the upper end of one of the steep streets, which up to that point was very narrow, like all the Floundershayle streets, but widened there abruptly, leaving a free space

in front of the inn, a sort of sandy slope, where three or four old boats lay, keel uppermost—boats which would never put to sea again, and now appeared to have no other object in existence than to serve as convenient lounges for the gossips of the place. In each of the inn windows which flanked the front door there was stuck a paper, once white, now yellow by the action of the salt air. On one of these papers it was announced that hot coffee was to be had within on the shortest notice; on the other, in the same handwriting, and, as it were, 'in the same tone of voice, wooden coffins were promised, also at the shortest notice.

Considering the very frequent occurrence of violent death upon this coast, the advertisement of the coffins really required no explanation; but to the mind of a superstitious traveller there would appear to be some depressing connection between the two announcements in the two windows, as if the requirement of the second article was a simple and natural result of the consumption of the first.

It was in this inn that Maud, in charge of little Hal and his nurse, found herself installed. The nurse was in despair at everything, beginning with the coffee and ending with the mattresses; and the corners of Hal's mouth went down a little when he discovered that the beach was of rock and not of sand, and that his wooden spade would not dig holes in granite; but Maud complained of nothing. Her curiosity had reached a pitch that was almost fever-heat, or would have been fever-heat had the hot-headed Maud not been resolutely kept under by the cool-headed Maud. It was the cool-headed Maud who determined that one whole day should be devoted to resting from the fatigues of the journey, calmly reviewing the situation, and cautiously making inquiries.

"Samuel Foote?" said the landlady, when questioned—"it's him we call the outlandish bootmaker." Why was he called so? The landlady really was not very sure, except that it might be he had come from some outlandish parts when he settled in the country some ten or twelve years ago. No one denied that he

was crazy, but for all that he made fishing-boots that stuck together in the sea-water longer than any that were made for miles and miles around, and therefore, despite his inconvenient position, he never lacked customers. "But if it's giving him an order you're after, miss, you might as well spare yourself the trouble, for he'll not take it."

"Why not?" asked Maud in surprise.

"He'll neither make nor mend a shoe for any woman, be she old or young, foul or fair; it's just one of his crazy ways."

"A woman-hater, then," said Maud to herself, in considerable amusement, and with an increased thrill of interest, for the idea of a woman-hater tallied most admirably with that of a rejected lover. "Is that why he lives so far away by himself?" she inquired.

"That's it, miss; he can't abide the sight of a woman's face. He's got better days and worse days. Sometimes, maybe, when a girl comes along with her father's boots to be patched he'll snap a few words at her, though mighty sharp ones; but oftener he'll turn his back and play

the deaf, dumb, and blind, whatever you may do or say, and once he gets that fit, red-hot pincers wouldn't get a word out of him."

Presently Maud succeeded in discovering that the spot where Samuel Foote lived was the spot of what had once been one of the mines worked by the Bevan family. It stood on Gullyscoombe ground, and was distant several miles. The name of the old mine? The name of the old mine was Wheal Tally-ho; it had been shut up years ago. The stolid but civil landlady was quite sorry to have to remember how many years ago it was. "Wheal Tally-ho," repeated Maud to herself,—where had that name got a place in her memory? Then it came back to her: the glass case in the library at Kippendale, and Lord Kippendale, with civilly repressed impatience, explaining to her about the different copper-samples. Yes, she remembered now quite well. Wheal Tally-ho was the old copper-mine which had come to grief, as Lord Kippendale expressed it, just about the same time that his brother Ronald had come to grief. It was the mine that had grown so poor that the pro-

priety of working it further had become an open question, when, again in Lord Kippendale's words, half-a-dozen yards of roofing had mercifully fallen in, and thus had settled the question in favour of abandonment.

Upon this day of voluntary inaction there followed two more days of enforced inaction—enforced, alas! by the rain, which boisterously pelted the inn windows, and which, no doubt, was doing exactly the same to the windows of Gullyscoombe House, over at the other side of the bay. Maud could not help wondering how her friends were spending these dismal hours. She hoped, she hardly knew why, that she would not meet any of them before the question of Samuel Foote was settled one way or the other. But she had no objection to listening to what the landlady had to say about them, and the landlady had a good deal to say, for the subject was naturally one of very vital interest in this neighbourhood. By the evening of that third day, Maud was in possession of a very fair collection of particulars concerning what the family at Gullyscoombe had said and done and

looked since their advent in those parts. "Shall I be merciful and pass them on?" said Maud to herself, with a smile, that night after Hal had been packed into bed, and she sat alone in the little primitive sitting-room; and then, perhaps because she had nothing to do, perhaps because she so very distinctly remembered that last look she had seen on Mr Carbury's face, she pulled the inkstand towards her, and, almost before she was aware of it, had covered three pages with her first imperfect and not over-cheerful impressions of the country. "If Gullyscoombe is one quarter as bad as its description," she wrote, "it is no wonder that, despite their high spirit, they have begun to mope already, and that poor Lord Kippendale has aged a year for every week of his exile." And then, for decency's sake, something was said on the fourth page about a pair of gloves that were to be strong and cheap, and regarding which she would be very grateful, &c.

Next day the sky was still of a hardened hopeless grey; but the rain had ceased to fall, and Maud resolved to delay no longer. Despite

the landlady's warning, she carefully wrapped a pair of old shoes in paper: whether they were accepted or not, they would do equally well as a means of introduction. Having established Hal at a window from which he could watch the string of men that were carting sea-weed on the beach—for the tide was out—Maud, with her parcel under her arm, a map of the country in her pocket, and a few general directions as to the road carefully stored in her memory, sallied forth on her voyage of discovery. Turning her face away from the sea, she threaded her way between the little close-packed grey houses until the path was struck which led her past the little grey church. Beyond the church there stood one or two solitary huts and some square enclosures, used for the cattle at night, and consisting of low loose walls of stone, kept only from crumbling down entirely by the bramble and furze which overgrew them. A gap in the wall, and the scattered stones beside it, ready to be built into their place when the cattle should have entered, was all the gate that could be afforded in this country of much stone and

little wood. A little farther on Maud passed some of the cows themselves, lifting their legs rather disconsolately from between the prickly furze, and looking very much, poor beasts, as though they had been fed upon something about as nourishing as that everlasting grey granite from which there seemed no escape.

The path had now become a sort of steep lane, sunk between high stony sides. By degrees, as the path mounted, the banks lowered; but it was not until she had been walking for fully half an hour that Maud emerged at last into the open, and was able to judge of the sort of country she was traversing.

A naked line of hills confronted her; their crests jagged into a rocky outline, as forbidding as battlements and as sharp as teeth, their flanks scattered over with granite blocks, savagely piled or wildly strewn. The summer blaze of furze-blossom had long since been quenched—all but a few yellow flames that lingered to crest a ridge or touch a hollow. For one bush in bloom there stood a hundred that were flowerless, or rustling with bleached remains, the

ghosts of a fire that has burnt itself to ashes. Here and there, at great intervals, there was something that would have liked to be a tree, if only that tyrannous sea-breeze would consent ; but these were all twisted and curiously contorted by the action of the wind, and the only leaves that grew to normal size were those that were turned towards the land. Every bush was thus but half developed, kept under by the knife of the gale where it stood exposed, which gave to them all a curious one-sided look. Seen from afar, these widely scattered trees, all leaning in one direction, all with their backs to the sea and their faces to the land, with their knotted branches and crazy trunks, appeared like a scattered band of fugitive cripples, hunch-backed, lame, and dwarfed, hobbling away on their sick legs from the enemy behind them, but condemned by an unkind fate to hobble for ever on the same spot, and to stretch their arms in vain towards the shelter which they so sorely need, but which it is their destiny never to reach. Presently the path which Maud was following changed its character once more. It

had begun by being a road, it had then turned into a lane, it had now become a path, and soon no more than a thread or a shadow of one, scarcely discernible as such except where looking some way ahead the darker green of the crushed grass caught the eye. All this time it had been steadily mounting, and soon Maud found herself in the midst of the scattered stone-blocks which she had seen from afar, and for the first time experienced the oppressive desolation of a granite moor.

And now the hillside begins to assume the appearance of a vast graveyard, with a graveyard's mournfulness, but without a graveyard's peace. These reeling slabs, these tottering pillars, these monumental piles, rudely thrown down and recklessly scattered, all seem to speak of tombs desecrated and broken repose. If the Choughshire giants of old do indeed sleep under these tumbled headstones, as it is hard to believe they do not, it is quite clear, at any rate, that they do not sleep well. Neither is their memory cherished, nor are their resting-places tended ; only the bramble with its thorny

branches clasps the stone, only bitter berries drop upon it : for epitaph these much neglected giants have but the scars graven by the beating rain ; and for mourner, the white sea-bird that flits moaning over the rock.

As Maud's eyes roamed from side to side, her heart seemed to stand still in face of this strong desolation. There was nothing living in sight, nothing that seemed to speak of life having ever been there, unless it were that shadowy thread of a path on ahead, and a tuft of sheep's-wool caught upon the thorns of a furze and fluttering in the wind. How long she wandered on thus Maud never exactly knew, nor how often she made up her mind that she had lost her way, nor how feverishly she consulted her map. She knew only that when her anxious eyes were at last rewarded by something that stood out boldly against the sky—something that was too tall for a tree and too straight for a pile of boulders—she gazed at it for more than a minute incredulously, and almost refused to believe that this was really a mine-chimney. But, once having convinced herself of the fact, she left the path

without hesitation, and took what seemed to be the straightest road across country. It was with soaked feet and panting chest that she stood at length beside the old mine-buildings. The ground which they occupied was comparatively level, but at a few hundred paces off a new ridge of hill rose at so decided an angle as to present what was apparently a wall of rock curtained and fringed by tangled overgrowth. It was only now that with a qualm the question arose, Is it the right place after all? At first sight the engine-house alone, with its granite chimney, appeared to have escaped ruin. There was an open shed or two with a certain amount of roof remaining, and there were several large uneven mounds of rubbish, the mining "deads" of former days, now half buried in weeds. The place had evidently been dismantled years ago, though, to judge from the extent of its ruins, it had once upon a time been a large concern. All the window-frames and doors had been torn out, though the walls had been left to stand, for wood was as precious in this country as stone was cheap.

· “This is the wildest of all wild-goose chases,” reflected Maud, as she picked her way among the weeds and rubbish; “a shoemaker here, indeed!” She had scarcely said it when, on turning a corner, she caught sight of a curl of smoke, a row of beehives, a band of flowers, and a blue signboard with the portrait of a wonderful sort of boot, for which the requisite sort of leg would still have to be invented, and the following inscription, “Samuel Foote, Man Bootmaker”—this written so large that he who might chance to run here could certainly not fail to read. The door over which the blue board hung was closed, and evidently in working order; and there were panes, very much crossed with strips of paper but still panes, in the window beside it. It was clear that this one little corner of the deserted buildings had been made habitable; there was even a rough stone fencing round the band of flowers, composed evidently of stones dragged together from the ruins around. By the side of the patched-up building stood a pile of dead furze, neatly stacked and carefully weighted with stones. Finding herself so near the attain-

ment of her object, actually face to face with the veil which shrouded the mystery, Maud stood still in a sort of dismay. It rushed over her that what she was going to do was no less than putting her own fate and that of the house of Kippendale to the touch. The idea which had been for the last fortnight the mainspring of her actions had never appeared to her so insanely far-fetched, so pitiably improbable, as it appeared at this moment. If she stayed her hand before lifting the veil, it was not because she was afraid of the mystery that lay behind ; rather it was because she was afraid that there was no mystery there—that, after all, this old shoemaker was just an old shoemaker and nothing more, and that she herself would within the next ten minutes be proved the dupe of her own ingenuity.

But it was too late to retreat. With resolute steps Maud approached the door. A row of wooden boot-shapes leant against the wall, with the leather stretched over them for drying, looking rather like amputated legs. The beehives were iron collars round their necks, and being securely tethered to the walls, could no doubt

stand their ground in the teeth of the fiercest blast. Among the overblown flowers the bees were busily murmuring. Within, also, there was a sound—some one whistling in a shrill, sharp, melancholy tone. Maud rapped boldly with her umbrella against the door, and the whistling at once turned into a plaintive grumbling which gradually approached the door, accompanied by shuffling steps. Then a little, old man, a curiously hideous, little, old man looked out upon Maud. Everything about him was crooked, beginning with his mouth, which went down at one side as though he had just swallowed a spoonful of unadulterated vinegar, and his nose, which inclined one way more than the other, and ending with his feet, which appeared to be of different sizes, a much worse match than any boots he had ever made—at least, it was to be hoped so for the sake of his customers. His shoulders also were of different heights, and no one of his fingers appeared to be in the slightest degree related to any of the nine others—scarcely, in fact, to be on bowing terms with

them. Altogether, Maud, as she saw him, felt reminded of those grotesquely contorted trees which she had noticed in her upward walk. To make this general inequality complete, he was one-eyed. The remaining eye was small and grey; if he had ever had another, most likely it had been black or blue, so obstinately did Nature appear to have made up her mind that nothing about this unlucky creature should match anything else. "I am not in the least surprised at Molly not having taken *this* one," said Maud to herself, as she surveyed the figure of fun before her. The queer little shoemaker had come to the door holding a half-finished boot in one hand, but at sight of Maud he dropped it, and stood regarding her in an attitude of petrified consternation.

"I have brought a pair of shoes to be new heeled," began Maud in a clear and decisive tone.

The shoemaker glared for about a minute longer, with his sour mouth going down at one corner, and his solitary eye dilating with what looked like a mixture of alarm and suspicion. Then, slowly disclosing some half-

dozen teeth, each of a different size, shape, and colour, he turned his misshapen head over the lower of his two shoulders. "Did she read the sign?" he observed, in a voice as full of cracks and fissures as an old fiddle-board. "It is written plain, and it is written big. Shall I have to write it bigger?" He did not seem to be speaking to Maud but to somebody in the interior of the room.

"Well," said Maud calmly, "will you mend my shoes?"

"Will I mend her shoes?" said the shoemaker, speaking just as before. "They haven't asked me that question these ten years. I thought the women-folk knew me—it's time they did; ha! she had better read the sign."

Maud was much taller than the old man, and, peering over his shoulder, she could catch a glimpse of the room within. It seemed to be at least as funny as Lady Baby had described it, very small and very full, and papered apparently something on the principle of a scrap-screen. What puzzled her most was the silence which met Samuel Foote's remarks. Crane her

neck as she might, she could catch no glimpse of any person within.

“ Well, whether you mend them or not, I cannot possibly walk back without a reasonable rest,” said Maud, and, coolly putting the shoemaker to one side, she walked past him into the room. She found herself standing in a little square space, very close and very stuffy, with a smell of flowers, of leather, and of grease, and yet, at the same time, as scrupulously neat as a box of toys. There were boots finished and half finished standing on the table, pieces of leather just shaped, mere silhouettes of boots, packets of soles and whole skins still untouched. Pots of grease and bobbins of thread were ranged in long rows upon shelves on the wall. Walls and ceiling were papered entirely with a mixture of printed matter and pictures. Most of this was large-typed advertisements, often illustrated, and proclaiming generally some shoemaker’s requisite, such as “ the indestructible iron thread,” or, “ the best waterproof patent ready-made soles, in packets of a hundred dozen.” At the bottom of one of these papers Maud’s eye

caught the word "Philadelphia"; and going nearer in some surprise, she proceeded to examine it. She then perceived that the papers on the wall were almost exclusively American, but most of them of very old date. "So these are the 'outlandish parts' he has come from?" thought Maud. "Let us say he fled broken-hearted to America at the time Molly bestowed her hand on Adam. Cheer up, Mr Detective; so far, so good!" Even the chimney-piece was covered with these papers. It was to the chimney-piece that Maud next directed her particular attention. There was a great variety of ornaments there. There were branches of sea-weed stuck in glasses, and there were shells and crab-backs arranged in symmetrical rows, like the bobbins and the pots of grease. It seemed as if the little crooked shoemaker had a vague idea of making up for the want of symmetry in his own person, by a passion for putting everything around him in rows and lines and precise shapes. But Maud's piercing eyes had instantly noted that among the miscellaneous ornaments there was nothing resembling a

copper-cairn, neither were there any forked twigs hanging anywhere on the walls. "Better and better," was Maud's comment, as she noted this distinctly suspicious circumstance. "He has had a fright, and no mistake." But though there were no copper-cairns on the chimney-piece, there was another very curious ornament there, an ornament which proudly graced the centre, and which for a little time puzzled Maud's ingenious guesses. Finally she came to the conclusion that it was a shoe, clumsily made of cloth, with something almost prehistoric about its shape; obviously very old, and yet apparently having been little worn, for the inside was in the same condition as the outside. It stood on a little square of nicked-out leather, and had once apparently been shaded by a glass globe, of which there now only remained the rim and a few fragments—the letter of the law without the spirit. Despite the laborious tidiness—a want of common-sense betrayed itself here and there in the disposition of the things,—something that spoke of incongruity in the mind that had planned it all.

Everything in the room was unexpected and puzzling, even this that no second occupant was visible—nothing but a large white tom-cat sitting on the table among the half-finished boots, with long silky fur that seemed to have been spun of snowflakes, and a pair of enormous round eyes, as brilliantly blue as two freshly gathered marsh forget-me-nots.

Samuel Foote meanwhile had partially recovered from his consternation; with a gesture of feeble resignation and a shrug of the higher of his two shoulders, he picked up the boot he had dropped and went back to work. Maud's decision had evidently overawed him, but his face might be likened to that of a holy monk who sees the sanctuary of his cell invaded, so much disgust, so much horror was written there.

“And now,” said Maud, standing by the chimney-piece and surveying him sharply through her narrowed eyelids—“and now I want to know what possible reason you can have for grudging me a pair of new heels and a handful of nails for fixing them with.”

“So they be not the nails in her coffin,” said

the shoemaker, without looking round, "she shall not have them." Again he seemed not to be speaking *to* her but speaking *at* her, through the medium of some invisible personage. Decidedly this was not one of the outlandish bootmaker's "good days," as indicated by the landlady.

"You seem a little put out, Mr Foote," said Maud; "is that boot not getting on?"

He turned his eye suspiciously upon her, as if he doubted her intention in putting the question.

"I have been a little put out for the last thirty years," he replied; then, appearing to recollect himself, he withdrew his gaze. "Do you hear her speak, New York?" he said. "My work to be done before sundown, and a woman chattering at my elbow. Do you hear her talk?"

This time Maud saw that he was looking straight at his cat.

"What is it you call your cat?" she asked.

"New York," said Samuel Foote.

"What?"

"New York," said the shoemaker again, quite calmly. Maud thought it was a good deal for a

cat to be called, but Samuel Foote apparently did not think so, nor did New York itself, to judge from the air of perfect satisfaction with which it curled its feathery tail over its velvet toes, neither oppressed nor embarrassed by the vastness of its title.

“I suppose you brought him with you from America?” suggested Maud.

“Who says I’ve been in ‘Meriky’?” snapped Samuel Foote over his shoulder.

“Well, your wall-paper seems to say so, for one thing.”

The old man threw a malignant glance at his walls, and then, with an uneasy grunt, settled again to his work. It was not until Maud had repeated her question in several different shapes that she remembered the landlady’s words, and recognised one of those attacks of silence which, according to her informant, were deep enough and dogged enough to defy anything short of red-hot pincers. “Evident discomfort at mention of America,” went down immediately in Maud’s intangible note-book,—“circumstance to be further investigated at convenient moment.”

In the meantime she wisely dropped the point at issue, and made some harmless remark about bees and flowers, which drew a grudging reply from the shoemaker. In this way a sort of lame conversation was carried on for a little time, Samuel Foote either not answering or addressing his replies exclusively to his cat; Maud cautiously putting out feelers in the shape of personal questions, then hastily snatching at the first subject that came uppermost when she perceived that alarm had raised another of those blank walls of silence. She very soon discovered that, although the blank wall was not to be knocked down by pressure, it was easily circumvented by stratagem, a diplomatic change of topic being all that was wanted. But it was a slow process, and at the end of ten minutes she did not seem to have gained much ground. It was during the fifth or sixth of these silent fits that Maud found herself obliged, for want of a rousing topic, to fall back upon that of her heelless shoes.

“’Twould have saved some trouble,” grumbled Samuel Foote, “if she’d used her eyes instead of

her tongue. What made her not read the sign ? it's writ big enough : ' Samuel Foote, *Man Boot-maker.*' "

" And yet Samuel Foote must once upon a time have been a ladies' shoemaker," said Maud, — " at least, if he made this," and as she spoke she touched the curious cloth slipper which graced the centre of the chimney-board.

" Don't touch it ! " shrieked the old man suddenly. " Don't touch it ! It is a poisonous thing—it burns, it smells."

" Smells ? " said Maud in surprise. " No, it doesn't."

" Yes, it does ; it smells of badness and cruelty and falseness, of all the wicked women in the world. But it is neatly made," he added, in the same breath ; " it is as neatly made as a shoe need be, and yet she said it did not fit." The last words were quavered out in a tone of profound aggrivement.

" And the second shoe," asked Maud—" the fellow of this one ? Where is it ? "

" At the bottom of the sea," said Samuel Foote, promptly ; and then, perceiving all at

once that he had been addressing himself directly to Maud, he turned sulkily away, and with the handle of his big scissors poked the ribs of the white cat. "New York" had been disposing himself to slumber among the half-finished boots, but feeling himself appealed to in this very tangible manner, he sat up drowsily. No doubt he was used to the various eccentricities which marked his master's "bad days." He seemed to be a cat of a phlegmatic disposition, perfectly satisfied with his personal appearance, otherwise indifferent to the world at large.

"At the bottom of the sea!" repeated Maud.
"Was she drowned?"

There was no answer. Samuel Foote's back remained steadily turned, his head bent low over the boot in his hands. It seemed to be a tough job, to judge from his heavy breathing.

"Was she drowned?" repeated Maud, but with the same result. The dogged fit was on again.

With the true detective's instinct, Maud had come here without any fixed plan in her mind, trusting to the circumstances of the moment for

the shape which her cross-examination was to take. Opportunities never fail to those who know how to make them, and Maud, seeing her opportunity here, did not hesitate for a moment. Moving round to where she could get a view of the shoemaker's bent face, she observed in the most matter-of-fact tone in the world, "Then the shoe was not Molly's after all?"

"And wherefore not?" said Samuel Foote instinctively, his one-sided mind evidently so taken up with the question itself that the oddness of its being put at all did not at once strike him.

"Why? because Molly was not drowned," said Maud, speaking quite as quietly as before, though her excitement was steadily rising at this fresh support of her cherished theory.

"It's a pity it wasn't so," muttered Samuel Foote, still lost in his own train of thoughts; "it's a sad pity indeed that every worthless hussy in the world that drops her shoe into the water doesn't tumble after it herself." He grumbled on for a minute more, oblivious of Maud's personality, and answering her words as

though he were answering his own random recollections.

“And so it was Molly who said that it did not fit,” Maud observed. “That was unkind.”

“She always was unkind,” said Samuel Foote, with a whimper that sounded almost like tears; and at that moment, as he groped for his scissors, they slipped to the ground with a clatter. Picking them up, he met Maud’s eyes, and instantly she saw that the spell of past memories was broken, and that he was once more conscious of his surroundings. First there came a look of hopeless bewilderment into his one eye, turned upon the tall figure beside his work-table; then very swiftly there followed a gleam of terror.

“It’s a lie,” he groaned, writhing on his bench. “Who says I ever set eyes on the giddy slut? It’s a lie.” And bending over his work, he once more settled down into that attitude which Maud by this time recognised as the certain symptom of the silent fit. Maud’s patience had lasted very well till now, but at this point it gave way. To have got almost

within touching distance of the very kernel of the mystery, and then to be brought up short by another of those blank walls, was rather too maddening even for a detective. Walking straight up to the chimney-piece, she observed, abruptly, "Where have you hidden away your little copper-mound? I hear it was so nicely gummed."

The blank silence came to an end instantly and rather noisily. Samuel Foote dropped not only his scissors this time, but also his boot; while New York, obviously annoyed by the disturbance, moved disdainfully to one side with an expression which seemed plainly and plaintively to ask whether there really was no spot at all on this table where a respectable cat might hope for five minutes' peaceful slumber.

"It's another of them!" cried Samuel Foote, seizing his head between his hands and rocking his body from side to side. "I might have known it was another of them, and they're all after the——" He broke off with a shriek, and suddenly tearing off his leather apron, darted towards one corner of the room and flung it

over some object which stood there half lost in the shadow. Maud, utterly taken by surprise, had just time to note that this object appeared to be a sack, or two sacks, filled with what might have been apples or potatoes.

Samuel Foote, having shrouded them in his apron, faced round towards Maud. "You're another of them, aren't you?" he panted.

"Another of whom?"

"Another Bévan?" he quavered, abjectly; "there was one here the other day, and you're another, aren't you?"

"I am not a Bevan," said Maud, quietly. The most acute shade of dismay faded out of the shoemaker's face. "But I am a friend of theirs—a great friend." The uneasiness returned. With one eye Maud was aware of this, while with the other she was curiously measuring that muffled heap in the corner. Behind that piece of leather there must, almost of necessity, be concealed some vital element of the secret, perhaps even the key to that labyrinth in which she found herself wandering with an ever-growing excitement, but also an in-

creasing bewilderment. It was not only because she was a detective, it was also because she was a woman, that Maud irrevocably resolved not to go back to Floundershayle that night without having ascertained the contents of those questionable sacks. For one minute she seriously contemplated the idea of making a rush for it, and trusting to her superior agility of movement for baffling Samuel Foote. But it was only for a minute. A hand-to-hand scuffle with the crazy shoemaker would have been rather too heavy a price to pay, even for the satisfaction of this devouring curiosity. From the shrouding apron she turned her eyes to the apronless shoemaker, and a very brief survey of his attitude and expression suggested to her another course of action. From his bench, to which he had dragged himself back, Samuel Foote was hungrily intent upon the momentous corner. His eye dilated towards it; the hands with which he had vaguely clutched his work were nervously jerking, and the fingers were closing and unclosing themselves upon the leather with a grip of meaning-

less violence. He sat on the extreme edge of the bench, as though strung to the most extreme pitch of readiness, and his trembling tongue passed once or twice across his lips with an action that betrayed the very agony of impatience. "He's all but ready to jump out of his skin to be at it," reflected Maud; "he'll be at it before I've well shut the door behind me." She regarded him steadily for a minute longer; then, with an excellently simulated yawn, she picked up her parcel, and proceeded to observe that the afternoon was getting on, and that since Mr Foote's heart remained so obstinately hardened against her unlucky heels, she supposed she had better be getting back to Floundershayle. And with this, and with a friendly nod, she stepped briskly to the door, and without so much as once turning her head, proceeded to pick her way among the ruins towards the open hillside.

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